

Foundations of Systemic Constellations

Introduction

Systemic constellations are a way of working with issues within human systems. Their initial and most common application is in relation to issues within your families or arising from your families. These are called family constellations. Their other main use is in relation to organizations such as businesses, clubs schools etc. These are called organizational constellations.

Although it is possible to do this work in a one to one session with a practitioner, it is usually done within a group of unrelated people. Members of the group are chosen to represent members or elements of the family or organization that is being addressed. In this process hidden and unexpected dynamics operating within the system are revealed and addressed in a way that aims to find a healthy and respectful place for all members of the system in question.

A number of these constellations are usually done within the same group over the duration of a workshop which may extend from one to several days. As well as addressing these issues participants experience a deeper empathy for and a broader perspective on a number of families and organizations within a workshop. This is partially responsible for the deeper sense of compassion and belonging that it engenders in workshop participants.

Through this process we can see and feel our shared strength and vulnerability with family members, with the rest of humanity and indeed with the rest of the planet. We feel the complex web of interconnection reaching into our present, from generations past, providing a springboard into the future. It is now commonplace to find books and documentaries referring to these ideas of interconnectedness. They are appearing in many fields including environmentalism, quantum physics, psychology and spirituality. It is however a rare jewel that allows us to experience this interconnectedness so directly. The systemic constellation process is such a rare jewel.

Systemic constellations reveal and to some extent clarify the functioning forces in living systems that are otherwise still very challenging to understand and use. There are hints of these same forces in nature when we see everyday mysteries such as the synchronized swooping of flocks of birds. (Sheldrake R. 2003) If the coordination was based on the birds perceiving each other through their normal senses as we understand them, then their change of direction would be staggered looking like dominoes falling. Instead they move as one entity with no delay. Systemic constellations also rely on modes of communication that we don't yet completely understand. This allows a family's dynamics to be revealed through the use of representatives.

Intellectually we may be able to understand complex systemic issues such as how a baby's still birth might cause a severe unresolved grief in the parents and affect their bonding with a subsequent daughter. That daughter's development may then be severely effected to the point where it interferes with her parenting of her own children. When her child comes into therapy it is almost impossible to address the effect of his still born uncle by classical psychotherapeutic interventions. It is very easy for the therapist and the client to become stuck in a resentment of the emotionally unavailable mother in such a situation.

However the systemic constellation process reveals a simple and memorable picture of the dynamic that allows the client to have a compassionate overview of the entire situation. This healing picture enables him to let go of taking his mother's emotional unavailability personally. He can then accept the gift of his life fully; free of the resentments which have hitherto poisoned his life.

Just as the natural forces that lie behind electricity have always been present in nature, just as the force of gravity holds together the different elements in our universe, the forces revealed in the systemic constellation process have always been with us. This process has become visible through a lineage of philosophers and therapists such as [Edmund Husserl](#) the father of phenomenology, [Ivan](#)

Boszormenyi-Nagy, the pioneer of transgenerational systemic thinking, Virginia Satir who developed family sculpture the precursor of systemic constellations and which Bert Hellinger observed and integrated with the phenomenological method .

			
Edmund Husserl (1859 -1938)	Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy (1920-2007)	Virginia Satir (1916-1988)	Bert Hellinger (born 1925)

Just as people like Benjamin Franklin(1706-1790), Alessandro Volta (1745-1827) and Thomas Edison (1847-1931) showed us how electricity could be understood, people like Bert Hellinger, Jakob Schneider, Gunthard Weber, Hunter Beaumont, and Albrecht Mahr have found ways of revealing and beginning to understand the mysterious forces that bind us together as groups of human beings. In both fields the newer personalities are part of a much longer lineage.

			
Jakob Schneider	Gunthard Weber	Hunter Beaumont	Albrecht Mahr

So the systemic constellation process did not appear out of a vacuum. There have been hints of it in ancient cultures with Chinese ancestor worship, shamanistic traditions, first nation cosmologies such as the Aboriginal dreamtime and Africans calling for strength from their ancestors to mention but a few.



Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime Painting

The land owns us; we don't own the land.
The land owns us; we don't own the land.
We are part of the land.
From the time we are children we learn the songs and stories about the land.
For thousands of years, these songs and stories have been part of the people's oral tradition and beliefs.

The Aboriginal painting and poem above illustrate how first nation people understand humans as part of a much larger ecological system. Western philosophy and science has generally not acknowledged this fact until the advent of modern day biologists and environmentalists. Systemic constellations demonstrates that humans as part of families and then larger organisational systems expanding right out into the global ecological system.

However the modern European psychological tradition created the groundwork for this particularly effective and elegant process called the systemic constellation process. This series of articles explores these historic foundations of the systemic constellation process. There are many related areas not covered in these articles. Some related areas not yet included are:

- The interrupted reaching out movement
- The influences that shaped Bert Hellinger's individual evolution to the point that he was able to discover and develop the systemic constellation process.
- The connection with preexisting systems of understanding that may be dealing with the same energies
- The ongoing development and evolution of the Systemic Constellation Process including:
 - Organisational constellations
 - Structural constellations

Eventually we hope to have a wiki page so that more articles can be written and so that these articles can be added to and edited by membership.

This series of articles explores the origins and foundations of that lineage.

Sheldrake R. (2003) pp 113-116. The sense of being stared at and other aspects of the extended mind. Random House London

Chapter 1: Overview

The defining feature of systemic constellation work is the phenomenological constellation which was originally developed for families and then applied to other systems such as businesses, organisations, education and the medical field. These constellations have evolved from the interweaving of three different strands:

1. Firstly **systemic theory** as developed by family therapists in the latter half of the 20th century provides the theoretical basis for understanding the dynamics seen in constellations.

Systemic theory acknowledges that all elements within a system, such as family members, are interdependent and interactive. It also acknowledges that the system is greater than the sum of its parts. So if you put all the components of a car in a pile on the floor you do not have a car. Similarly a family is more than just a number of individuals lumped together. Each individual has special roles and relates to each other individual in particular ways. This becomes very clear with the simple phrase "Parents are parents and children are children."

2. The second strand is the **technique of using representatives** first to represent family members and later elements of larger systems and even concepts. The earliest example of this technique in the Western therapies was **Jacob Moreno's psychodrama**, which was developed in the 1920's and 30's.

These first two strands were initially interwoven by **Virginia Satir** in the 1960s with the process of family sculpting. This three dimensional representation of family dynamics was shown to be very powerful in uncovering and clarifying previously hidden dynamics within the system.

3. **Phenomenology is the third strand.** It can be loosely interpreted as being a technique of acknowledging what is without preconception or prejudice. It is far more difficult than it first sounds and requires practice and mental training.

Although the **phenomenological method** had been present in Buddhist mindfulness practices for 2500 years, it then developed independently as a western philosophical movement from the time of **Edmund Husserl**.

Bert Hellinger was responsible for introducing this third strand, creating a new method composed of all three. The addition of phenomenology gave us a deeper way of perceiving systemic dynamics that permits the emergence of surprising insights.

Bert Hellinger also developed a number of theoretical understandings that further supported the development of this way of working. This included such themes as:

1. The orders of love. (Hellinger 1998 pp151-172)
2. An innovative conceptualisation of conscience, guilt and innocence. (Hellinger 1998 pp3--49)
3. Blind love versus enlightened love as seen in entanglements. (Hellinger 1998 p161)
4. A useful conceptualisation of feelings as: primary, secondary, taken over and meta-feelings. (Hellinger 1998 pp 224-227) The division into primary and secondary feelings had already been well established but it is not clear where it originated. Marsha Linehan discusses this distinction in her book on Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (Linehan 1993 pp227) where she attributes the concept to Greenberg and Safran (1987)

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Hellinger B. Weber G. Beaumont H. (1998) *Love's Hidden Symmetry; What Makes Love Work in Relationships* ISBN 978-1-891944-00-0

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Chapter 2: Systems Theory and Family Therapy

Most of the principles underlying systemic constellation work were clearly outlined by family therapists from the 1960's onward.

The basic theory of family therapy was derived mainly from systems theory and cybernetics. **Ludvig Von Bertalanfy** introduced general systems theory to the social sciences and psychology in the 1960's. This led to family therapists developing the fundamental idea that the family is an interactive unit affected by past generations and operating on a set of unifying principles, which includes the ideas that:



- **The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.** So a living human body is more than just its organs and limbs. It depends on how they connect and interact. Similarly a family or organisation is more than just a number of individual members put together. It also depends on how they link and interact.
- **All elements in a system are interdependent.** Changes in one element result in changes in all the others.

In family dynamics this is especially obvious when a family member is excluded. This can be caused by a number of factors including extreme shame or grief. If, for example, a family member is excluded because he has brought shame on the family through illegal activities, then that exclusion has consequences for all the other family members.

In organic systems such as the human body or a family (as opposed to a machine like a car) the system works to maintain equilibrium. This process is called **homeostasis**. In this situation survival of the system takes priority over the survival of the component parts. So when a person is exposed to extreme cold the vital organs will be protected while the extremities may be permanently damaged by frostbite. This is clearly not an ideal solution but it may save a person's life. Similarly in families an individual may be sacrificed for the sake of the system. Family therapies look for better solutions when possible.

Important schools of family therapy that provide a background to systemic constellation work include:

Structural Family Therapy developed by **Salvador Minuchin**, in which he defined a "healthy" family structure. Some of the principles of a healthy family are reflected in Hellinger's theory of "The Orders of Love". Minuchin also showed how the movement of family members from one chair to another in the session demonstrated aspects of structures and change in the family.



Around the same time, the **Milan Group** in Italy (Mara Selvini-Palazzoli, Luigi Boscolo, Gianfranco Cecchin and Giuliana Prata) began to work with families and came to the conclusion that problems involved the family as a whole, not just an individual, and that there is a repetition of patterns from one generation to another.

Strategic Family Therapy, and later **Brief Therapy** was an outgrowth of the work of the **The Palo Alto Group** (Gregory Bateson, Don Jackson, Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland.) This involved patterns of communication. **Jay Haley** emerged as a leader in the USA using the teachings and techniques of **Milton Erickson (1901-1980)** an outstanding hypnoterapist whose work concentrated around interactive patterns.

Each of these major theorists had a part in creating a body of knowledge and a way of intervening with individuals, couples, and families that went beyond the confines of psychodynamic work. They included ideas such as the individual's symptom, such as anorexia, being seen as a function of the whole system. By reframing, the therapist attempts to weave the family's content and process together in a way that expands the focus to include all members of the family. The effect of the

healing picture, which often emerges during a constellation, serves effectively as a reframe and provides a lasting image of a family in which love flows.

Family Constellation work is a dynamic interaction that takes into consideration all these concepts and the transgenerational patterns that influence the individual from the past. In this regard there are two special areas of influence on the systemic stand of systemic constellation work:

1. Transgenerational family therapies
2. African tribal ancestor tradition

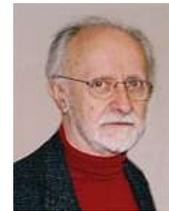
Chapter 3: Transgenerational Family Therapies

One of the special strengths of systemic constellation work with families is its ability to address transgenerational issues. Therefore it is no surprise that family therapies that specifically address transgenerational issues had a special and significant influence on systemic constellation work.



One of the first therapists to concentrate on the family of origin was **Murray Bowen** (1913-1990). At the core of his theory was the concept of differentiation, the degree of emotional reactivity to the family. His focus was helping individuals to avoid being "swallowed-up" by predictable family dynamics. An extreme example of this type of dynamic is when an individual becomes involved in a violent family feud even when it is clearly against his own best interests. This concept of differentiation underpins the transition from "blind love" to "enlightened love" as it was later described by Bert Hellinger.

The **Contextual Therapy** of **Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy** (1920-2007) introduced the concepts of loyalties, justice, fairness and balance, which cross generations. He saw how each person's actions inevitably have consequences for other family members and that those consequences flow from person to person and from generation to generation. This laid the groundwork for Bert Hellinger's idea that people linked to a family through life-changing events would then become an integral part of that family system.



More recently **the New Heidelberg School** (Helm Stierlin, Fritz Simon, Gunther Schmidt, **Gunthard Weber**) further developed multi-generational perspectives in systemic work.

At www.abacon.com/famtherapy/time.html, there is an interesting history of systems work placed in the context of what was happening in world history

Chapter 4: African Ancestral Tradition

Ancestral spiritual traditions are practiced in nearly all African tribal cultures. The ancestors of the tribe are honored as spirits who preserve the moral standards of tribal life. They are also regarded as the intermediaries between the living and the divine powers.

This is quite different from the better known Chinese ancestor worship. The early Christian missionaries called the African practices "Ancestor Worship". In fact, the Africans do not worship their ancestors in the same way as the Chinese. Please see the footnote below if you are interested in Chinese ancestor worship.

African ancestral traditions have a much more interactive relationship with dead ancestors. Bert Hellinger has outlined some Zulu ancestral practices:

"The way the Zulus do it is to bury the dead, and then after a year has passed, the deceased are welcomed back to the house through a ritual. The family members take a branch and imagine that the dead ancestor is sitting on the branch, which is dragged into the house. A certain section of the hut is reserved for ancestors and that's where the deceased have their place. Their place is always where the beer is. When someone drinks a beer, he or she gives the ancestors a few drops."

from "Acknowledging What Is" by Bert Hellinger and Gabriele ten Hövel, p58

In the African practices the relationship between a person and their ancestors is seen as a symbiotic relationship that goes both ways and influences in both directions. African tribal people work collaboratively with their ancestors for healing and strength.

According to Heidi Holland (2001), African traditional beliefs rest on three main themes:

1. Sacred images such as gods and ancestors which regulate the traditional universe.
2. Rituals and ceremonies by which these sacred images communicate moral patterns into living culture.
3. The earthly representatives of gods and ancestors – traditional healers, diviners, prophets, priests and sacred kings – who are servants of the community with the roles of mediating the sacred to the people through rituals and divination.

Africa's sacred images are mainly ancestor spirits. God is the creator, the spirit force responsible for all life on earth, including the ancestors, but he is too remote to hear the prayers of ordinary mortals. Dead ancestors, being spirits, communicate with God, mediating between him and humanity. This resonates with Bert's idea that many people try to bypass their parents by becoming spiritual:

"A common motivation for the search for God is that the searcher doesn't have a father and is looking for him. If the father is found, the search for God isn't so important anymore – or is different."

from Love's hidden Symmetry by Hellinger, Weber & Beaumont p122

According to Holland (2003), traditional healers or diviners – the prophets, physicians, psychologists and exorcists of African culture – are people chosen by the ancestors to interpret God's will on earth.

In West Africa, there is yearly dancing ritual where distinguished ancestral spirits "alight" on the heads of men to spiritually possess them. Each clan has a mythical pair of founders, whose son, as the oldest of ancestors, stands as the absolute ruler of all ancestral spirits. The actual clan head (the oldest man) derives his absolutism from his association with the ancestral spirits, whose power he can invoke to enforce his decrees.

When Bert Hellinger began systemic constellation work, he stated that he had been influenced by his 20 years working with the Zulu in South Africa. He has only given brief but tantalizing clues as to how this affected his ideas. Nonetheless the roots of these ideas are distinctive and notable in the **African**

tribal ancestral traditions. They appear among some of the novel theoretical contributions Hellinger made, adding significantly to our systemic understanding.

The use of ritual in family constellations would have been influenced by all the years Bert Hellinger worked as a Catholic priest. It is likely that the African influence would also have been important as Hellinger experimented with integrating Zulu music and rituals into the Catholic mass during his ten years working with the Zulus in South Africa (Hellinger, Love's Hidden Symmetry p328)

Hellinger acknowledges that he learned the fundamental need for humans to align themselves with the forces of nature from the Zulu (Love's Hidden Symmetry p328). This is reflected in the way family constellations cause healing in families by realigning the family systems to the natural orders of love. Interestingly a fundamental part of this process is acknowledging the previously excluded which is also a significant part of the African ancestral traditions.

An indigenous South African constellation practitioner, Lindiwe Mthembu Salter (2008), states:

“The belief in ancestors is rooted in the need or desire to preserve the memory of known past generations and known or unknown lineages. The emphasis of acknowledging the excluded is the foundation of the cure for various ailments, like bodily discomfort, spiritual discord or common need to wade off misfortune or a curse that will be seen to be projected by malevolent spirits. The good spirits are acknowledged and given gratitude through ceremonies or cleansing rituals. For example, a person will consult a traditional healer who will facilitate the session of finding a solution or a root cause of the trouble. This is often done through throwing the bones in order to constellate the wider family picture”.

See footnote on throwing the bones

Other examples of Hellinger's ideas which resonate with African Ancestral traditions are:

- The recognition that biological fathers are important in the family system even if not involved in any other way with their children. Although this could be deduced from **Boszormenyi-Nagy's** principles of contextual therapy, it was never before explicitly stated.
- The idea of ancestors going back many generations being felt as a resource and a source of strength. This includes the acknowledgement that our ancestors and family are deeply connected to both well-being and disease.
- Understanding that the individual is an integral part of his family and ancestral lineage. This idea is reflected in many cultures including the New Zealand Maori who talk about their ancestral lineage as the “**whakapapa**”
- Alignment in terms of order in the family – who comes first, generational lineage and continuity of the family tree including taking to account one who could still be causing problems until recognized.
- The importance of the effect of the excluded part or issues in a family and person's life, whether conscious or unconscious.
- Healing using symbolism and ritual and connecting with the deceased.
- Honouring of elders and the rightful place of the dead.

For more information on African ancestor worship go to

[Amatongo or ancestor worship](#)

[Ancestors in Africa: Selected readings and Mambila case material](#) prepared by *David Zeitlyn* as part of the Experience Rich Anthropology Project

Footnote on Chinese Ancestor Worship

Ancestral worship in China is a fusion of the teachings of Confucius and Taoism rather than a religious ritual. The main importance of this worship is the continuity of the family, reverence for the wisdom of the elders, and honouring ancestors through the achievements of the current generation (e.g. being an astronaut is considered a special honour to the whole family).

The practice is very ancient extending back before 1000 BC. The practices are essentially a family affair, and sometimes a village affair where most of villagers are under same family name. They are held in homes and temples (village) and consist of prayers and offerings before tablets.

The practitioners participate in the worship out of filial virtue, sometimes with banquets after ceremony, without any sense of fear of loss or hope for gain which helps to preserve a strong sense of family solidarity.

The rituals of Chinese ancestor worship occur around special annual events such as the spring festival which is a big family gathering like Western Christmas and the spring and autumn remembrances where rituals are performed at the ancestors gravesides. Also special events such as births, marriages, special achievements of the younger generation and deaths are all marked by rituals within this tradition.

Footnote on Throwing of the Bones



Traditional African healers use throwing of bones as a method of divination for the messages of the ancestors. The bones consist of symbolic elements for various family members as well as symbolic elements relating to a person's life: money, love, power, body organs, life force etc. Once the bones are cast, the healer considers the arrangements carefully, including how the bones are facing, the distance between the bones, configurations or patterns. The bones will fall to show the presence of spirits around the sick person, resentful ancestral spirits, offended nature or malevolent spirits. This gives the healer the picture of how the cause of the illness came about and what is needed as a remedy. Therapies can include animal sacrifices, rituals, massage, herbal teas, salves, snuffs, poultices, roots and herbs. African diviners play the role of spiritual leaders of ancient times and are diagnosers of both illness and mental problems (Meyburgh and Mthembu-Salter,

2008).

References:

Hellinger B. Weber G. Beaumont H. (1998) *Love's Hidden Symmetry; What Makes Love Work in Relationships* ISBN 978-1-891944-00-0

Bert Hellinger, Gabriele ten Hovel, and Colleen Beaumont (1999) [Acknowledging What Is: Conversations With Bert Hellinger](#) ISBN 1-891944-32-0

Heidi Holland (2001). African Magic: traditional ideas that heal the continent. Penguin Books

Tanja Meyburgh and Lindiwe Mthembu-Salter (2008) A Zulu woman's experience of Family Constellations: An interview between www.tanjameyburgh.co.za

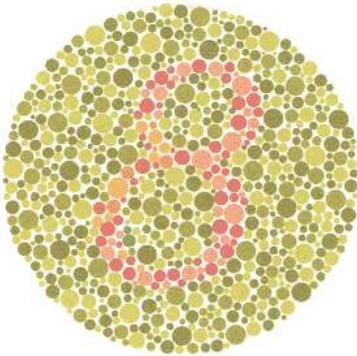
Chapter 5: Phenomenology

Definition

Phenomenology can be loosely interpreted as being a technique of acknowledging what is without preconception or prejudice. It is far more difficult than it first sounds and requires practice and mental training.

Western Phenomenology

Western Phenomenology began as a philosophical movement. It is the study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view.

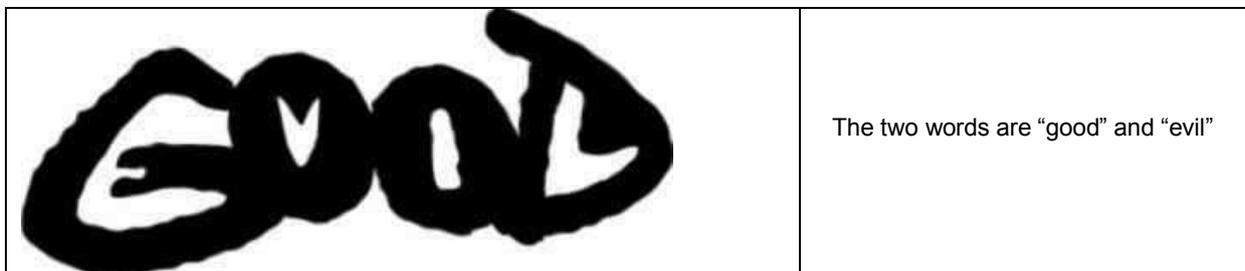


Phenomenology was developed by **Edmund Husserl** (1859-1917) He was influenced by **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) who developed the idea that mental structures precede experience. These ideas are still echoed today by cognitive scientists who would say mental structures filter experience. So if two people have different mental structures then their experience is different.

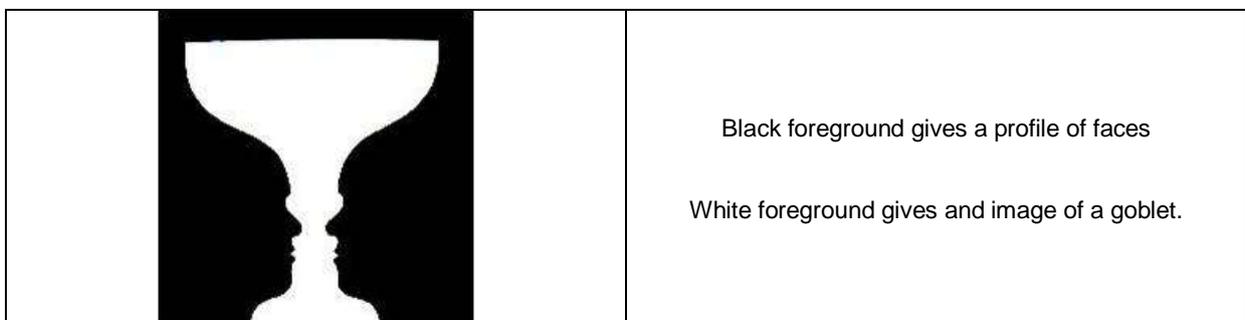
In the image to the left a colour blind person sees the number "3". Others see the number "8". What you see is as much determined by the colour receptors in your retina at the back of your eye, as by the picture itself. ([Ishihara colour tests](#))

Franz Brentano (1838-1917) was also an important influence. He emphasised the importance of subjective analysis of our own experience. He also noted the importance of the primacy of intention.

So which word do you initially see in the picture below? If you see a word in black you can intentionally look for the opposite word in the white. That is the primacy of intention in action.



Similarly you can alternate between two possible images in the picture below. In one the white is the foreground and the black the background. In the other image the black becomes the foreground.



So it becomes clear that acknowledging phenomena is a complicated process. An intrinsic part of our ability to be phenomenological is our ability to direct and to open our attention. One training method to develop these abilities is mindfulness which is discussed in Chapter 8: Eastern Phenomenology.



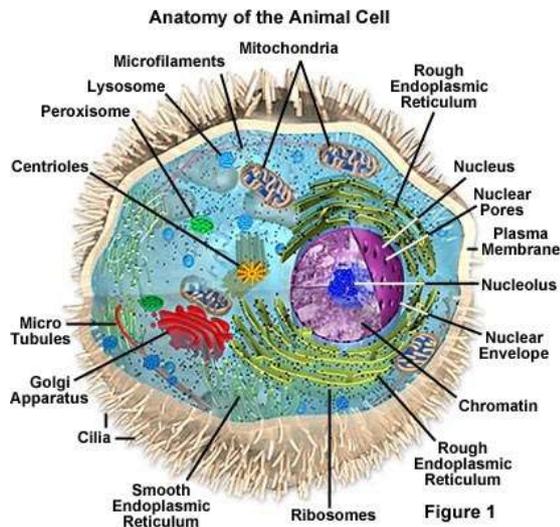
Existential phenomenology then developed out of the work of **Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976) who pointed out the impossibility of separating lived experience from the consensual background of cultural beliefs and practices (Varela 1998 p19). **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** (1908-1961) highlighted this when he said that because phenomenology is a discourse after the experience, it cannot recapture the richness of the experience itself (Varela 1998 p19). So a description of a sunset is not the same as the experience of the sunset.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Swiss psychiatrist **Ludwig Binswanger** (1881- 1966) was the first to combine psychotherapy with existentialism in working with patients as Medical Director of a sanatorium. **Existential phenomenology** started to influence the psychotherapies more significantly with the development of **existential psychotherapy** in the 1960's and 70's as seen in the work of people such as **Victor Frankl** (1905-1997) and **Irving Yalom** (b 1931). **Humanistic psychology** and **Gestalt Therapy** were also heavily influenced by the application of existential phenomenology.

The Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy has a very good description and summary of Western phenomenology online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology>

Chapter 6: Confusing phenomenology with the insights it yields

Phenomenology was also used in the early twentieth century, by **Karl Jaspers** (1883-1969) German psychiatrist and philosopher, to discover and define symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions in the mentally ill. Many psychiatrists then became confused and called the use of these symptom categories “phenomenology”. This information was correctly called “descriptive psychopathology” not “phenomenology”.



This confusion arose because the psychiatrists did not differentiate between the phenomenological method and the information which it revealed. It is as if a blind man was suddenly able to see and saw a dog and then called the dog vision itself rather than one of many things he could now see.

One way of understanding this dilemma is to think of phenomenology as providing a special way of perception that allows us to perceive things otherwise outside of our awareness. In this way phenomenology acts much like a microscope. When we look down a microscope we can see organisms and structures that are otherwise invisible. We are then able to see relationships between the different structures we see.

This analysis of what we see is not the same as looking down the microscope. Even if our analysis is wrong we can still look down the microscope. However what we see is going to be limited by the quality of the microscope. We are able to assess the accuracy of what we see through the microscope by checking our observations through other sources of knowledge such as the known behaviour of the structures we are observing. Similarly the accuracy our phenomenological observations will be limited by the quality of our phenomenological technique. Fortunately our phenomenological observations can also be checked for accuracy in relation to known facts.

When Hellinger used the phenomenological method, he discovered principles that supported the flow of love in families. He called these principles “**the orders of love**”. These principles also have been confused with the phenomenological method. So it is useful to remember the simple aphorism: “When you look down the microscope you can see a micro-organism. But the micro-organism is not the microscope.”

Chapter 7: Orders of Love

From phenomenological observation of the constellation process in family systems Bert Hellinger came to the understanding that the family system has a conscience which demands that the system be in order. He also discovered inherent principles which determine how this happens. The three main ones are:

1. Everyone has an equal right to belong to their family system
2. There is a hierarchy in terms of time.
3. Each person in the system carries their own fate

It is important to understand that these principles in themselves are not the phenomenological method but rather have been discovered through the application of phenomenological observations.

1. Everyone has an equal right to belong to their family system

The family system includes:

- All children- including the still born, adopted children and half-siblings and some aborted and miscarried children.
- Parents and their siblings
- Former partners of parents
- Grandparents & former partners
- Great grandparents (sometimes)
- Those who bore a loss or reaped a life changing benefit in relation to the family system e.g. people whose land was stolen by an ancestor.

We can exclude members from our hearts in many ways. We can avoid mourning or simply forget those who died young. We can disavow abortions, children who have been adopted out, extra marital affairs or prior relationships. People can be excluded because of their sexual orientation or political beliefs or some other form of disgrace or rebellion. Then the consequences can be felt by individuals in subsequent generations without their having any awareness of why they feel the way they do. For example, a young boy may carry the burden of not belonging for a homosexual uncle who has been excluded from the family system.

2. There is a hierarchy in terms of time.

This hierarchy defines the energetic relationship between family members. Everyone in the group must take place according to their rank of belonging for the system and all its members to thrive.

Parents came before the children. So they have responsibility for the children. Sometimes when a parent is weakened a child tries to care for the parent. When this situation is entrenched it is called parentification of the child. This is not only harmful for the child concerned but also for the entire family system.

There is a similar but less intense hierarchy between siblings in the order of birth.

3. Each person in the system carries their own fate

We have discovered through phenomenological observation that one member of a family will often take over the feelings of another. These feelings can include pride, shame, guilt and grief. Usually a younger member will take over the feelings of an older one. This is an unconscious process for all concerned. When this is rectified in the family constellation process everyone relaxes and the person who has been carrying someone else's feelings is finally free to respond skilfully and effectively to life's trials and tribulations.

The insight about the orders of love was presaged by similar observations in systemic family therapy. For example the destructive effects of parentification of the child had been noted for some time before systemic constellations appeared.

Chapter 8: Eastern Phenomenology

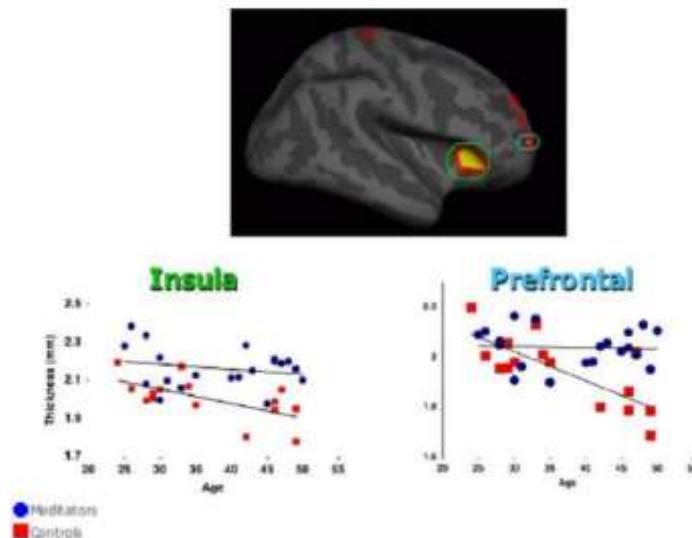
It should also be noted that the Buddhist technique now commonly referred to as [mindfulness](#) has increasingly been identified as the quintessential phenomenological method and has been around for over 2500 years. (Varela et al 1993) In traditional Buddhist writings mindfulness is known as [Vipassana](#).

Mindfulness has been defined as “the self regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, thereby allowing for the increased recognition of mental events in the present moment” and “a particular orientation towards one’s experiences in the present moment, an orientation that is characterised by curiosity openness and acceptance.” (Bishop 2004)

The eastern tradition has long term training practices for developing the capacity for mindfulness. The core practice is usually sitting meditation practice. However, mindfulness practitioners try to infuse this approach into all their daily activities by the practice of [Mindfulness in action techniques](#).

Over the last 30 years a number of mindfulness therapies have been developed and experimentally validated. This began with the work of [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#) with Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in 1979. In parallel, there has been an explosion of brain research which has shone some light on the processes of mindfulness and therefore phenomenology.

Cortical areas thicker in meditators



As the brain is the organ of the mind it is edifying to note the changes in the brain associated with meditation. The significance of these positive brain changes associated with meditation is that the processes involved in adopting the phenomenological stance can be trained and strengthened.

Even people who have only been meditating regularly for eight weeks show increased blood flow to the left frontal region of the brain. (Davidson et al 2003) This is an area important in the formation of intention and the control of attention. Both of these faculties are critical in the practice of phenomenology.

Lazar et al (2005) found that long term mindfulness meditators had increased thickening of the cortex of the middle prefrontal regions of the brain and of the right insula. These structures seem to be involved with empathy and self observation.

Brain areas that are thicker in practitioners of Insight meditation than control subjects who do not meditate. Graphs show age and cortical thickness of each individual, red= control subjects, blue = meditators.

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Chapter 9: Using Representatives for Family or System Members

Jacob Levy Moreno, M.D. developed the technique of psychodrama in the 1920's and 30's. This approach has clients assign family members to act out other roles within the family in order to help the client realize unconscious family dynamics. This was heavily influenced by psychodynamic formulations.

Family Sculpting has been described as a **basic technique of family therapy**. It was created by **Virginia Satir, MSW**, who blended this technique with the growing understanding of systems, thus moving beyond the limitations of psychodynamic formulations alone. This was considered an effective method of blending the cognitive and the experiential by physically arranging the family members as the client sees them so that the goal of re-shaping the family occurs. Unlike systemic constellations family sculpting allows the client to sculpt the physical posture of various representatives. For example the client may ask a representative to kneel down, turn their head or reach out with their arms.

Ruth McClendon & Leslie Kadis are a couple that run training in family therapy in Canada. They specialise in brief family interventions. Bert Hellinger acknowledges that he trained in family therapy with them and that is where he first encountered family constellations. They practiced Virginia Satir's family sculpting and family reconstructions.

While **Hellinger's** constellation also uses visual representation, it is unlike Psychodrama and Family Sculpting in that representatives stand quietly and allow themselves to be impacted internally by the power of the family dynamics which manifest through the Constellation that has been set up by the client. To maximise openness to this possibility the representatives are not sculpted but simply placed in position. Allowing this process to occur combined with the stance of the facilitator is where the **phenomenological method** comes into play.

Conclusion

Systemic constellations are a unique interweaving of the three strands of systemic understanding, using representatives and the phenomenological method. This combination allows something special to emerge. Albrecht Mahr calls it the "Knowing Field".

This knowing field consists of the energetic phenomena that arise during the systemic constellation process, largely independent of the preconceptions of the facilitator or client. This allows a new and healing picture to emerge that enables the client and their system (usually their family) to move forward more harmoniously, effectively and creatively.

Further developments such as movements of the soul and organisational constellations will be covered in a later article which will be called "Evolution of Systemic Constellation Work"