

Constellations, Psychotherapy, Standards and Associations... No, No, No!

By Vivian Broughton

"Personal Reflections" Page of The Knowing Field, in response to the question:

Should Constellation Work be Limited to the field of Psychotherapy?

I am interested in supporting the debate in this journal as to whether systemic constellations work should be confined to the psychotherapy profession, and in looking further at issues of standards, accreditation and associations. I am writing generally in support of the submissions by Diane Yankelevitz and Judith Hemming.

In short, as a psychotherapist of many years' experience and practice, my answer to the question as to whether Constellations work should be limited to the field of psychotherapy is no, it should not. In addition I would add that actually it cannot be tied to psychotherapy because at present psychotherapy's boundaries do not provide space for some of the things that constellations work is.

The argument for tying constellations to psychotherapy is only possible if one sees psychotherapy as the sole domain of personal and spiritual growth work, and probably grows out of a concern that psychotherapists alone know how to handle difficult issues such as re-traumatisation and fragile psychological processes. While I would agree that anyone working with constellations at the deeply personal and traumatised end of the spectrum is likely to be well supported by a good knowledge and understanding of trauma processes and psychological fragility, enough to recognise and contain any difficulties that may arise in one's work, this doesn't necessarily mean that it is only psychotherapists who can do this. And of course there are many practitioners in the constellations field who don't work at this end of the spectrum, such as coaches and OD consultants and other larger system and organisational professionals.

It is true that by the nature of the work a good psychotherapist should be familiar with and able to recognise signs of psychological disintegration or re-traumatisation, but there are many psychotherapists and counsellors who are seriously under-informed about these things; as with everything, a "good qualification" in something does not necessarily mean that good practice results. In addition there are so many other disciplines working at these levels of trauma that are outside the domain of psychotherapy as Diane Yankelevitz points out, such as shamans (ie Daan van Kampenhout), transpersonal workers, past life workers, homeopaths and so on.

To try to tie constellations to psychotherapy in my view falls on two points: the first is that psychotherapy as it is at present cannot account for some aspects of constellations, and the second is that to do so would make a mockery of all the other fields in which constellations is effective. It would be as ridiculous and ineffective as saying that it should be restricted to organisational consultants. Psychotherapists do not understand the organisational and business field in the same way as those who are deeply embedded and experienced in it, and organisational people don't understand psychotherapy in the same way as an experienced psychotherapist does even though many OD consultants have spent considerable time training in psychotherapeutic skills in order to do their own job better. Organisational professionals work best within the confines of their field and I work best within the confines of mine. Organisational professionals know about constellations in their field, and I know about them in mine. I don't understand Homeopathy as an experienced homeopath does, and I know homeopaths that work with constellations in their practice and find it very helpful.

Constellations as a practice and mode of working just does not fit into any previously defined discipline, and always builds on what the practitioner already has by way of experience and qualification, and on what they are professionally. It is best as a post-graduate discipline, and as such does not require a

qualification or assessment. It works alongside. The main issue that students in my trainings are concerned with is how to integrate their constellations understanding and experiences into their own work whatever that is, and much less on whether they get a qualification (which they don't).

Constellations and Psychotherapy:

Most work in any field will touch the personal level; many organisational constellations operate at dual levels, usually not named or made explicit but recognised by the facilitator and sometimes the client. Professionals in any field understand about holding the boundaries of their work within that which has been agreed by the contract.

But this 'personal level' in constellations work is also quite different from psychotherapy in many ways. As Judith asserts, my experience also is that those deeply embedded in a psychotherapy tradition often find it much harder to move from their established way of thinking to our way of thinking than others.

Firstly, the classic psychotherapy view in most disciplines assumes that we are affected solely by things that happen in our own life, or at a stretch by things that have happened in our parents' lives but rarely does a psychotherapist think further back than that.

Secondly, psychotherapists rarely consider the wider implications of societal events such as wars if they are a couple of generations back. They are comfortable with the notion of war trauma, but not as having an effect on the client if it happened to an ancestor they never knew.

Thirdly, a psychotherapist who includes in their work the practice of experiment such as two-chair, psychodrama or other representational dialogue work traditionally assumes that the experiences are projections coming from the client's own view. If something new emerges this, too, originates from the client's own inner state or from current interactions. Whereas we as constellations facilitators assume that representatives are in some kind of direct communication with a "knowing" field of intelligence or information. This changes everything in terms of the meaning we make of what happens, and leads us to treat such information differently.

Fourthly, most psychotherapy revolves around here and now relationship patterns and behaviours, and may use the relationship between the client and the therapist as its focus, either by focusing on the transference in the relationship or on the therapist as they actually are. Family systemic therapy for example typically is interested in relationship dynamics and behaviours between living members. Whereas the dynamics we focus on are the deeper dynamics of the systemic conscience that are only brought to light by the constellations process and an understanding of the natural systemic ordering, not by discussion or even by increasing personal awareness.

This understanding of the natural systemic ordering shows us that in many instances we are not in charge of things in the way that has been traditionally assumed in psychotherapy. Psychotherapy has elevated notions of 'personal responsibility' and that we create our own reality to very high levels. It's not that these notions are not true and valuable but, if not checked by an understanding of life's givens and 'isness', of the fact that there is much that influences us and motivates us that we do not, and probably cannot, understand or control, they lead us to an unrealistic and narcissistically induced state of hubris, which is extremely dangerous. As Judith succinctly puts it "Systemic work fits the needs of a post-individualistic world." Indeed.

And finally Hellinger's insights on conscience, belonging, guilt, innocence, loyalty, betrayal, perpetrator and victim dynamics, entanglement and 'blind love' and so on are outside of the box in terms of traditional psychotherapeutic thinking. As I write this I am not even sure that I can assess just how ground-breaking some of this thinking is in relation to the historical psychotherapeutic position from Freud on. Perhaps it is too soon to know.

None of this is to say that the psychotherapy profession could not expand its boundaries to include these things, as could many other disciplines, but it demonstrates that it would be inappropriate to tie the work to psychotherapy. It is in my view a dangerous mistake to think that the psychotherapy profession and psychotherapists themselves have any kind of sole and superior authority in the domain of working with people around personal issues and existential dilemmas.

I don't think it would make any sense to try and tie this work to anything... and even if we wanted to, I don't think it would be possible. It would be like trying to force a child to take up the violin when he was interested in trains. Let it be and become what it is and what it wants to be. Let's trust this amazing experiment in understanding our place in the myriad of systems around and within us. Let's trust in a systemic self-organising process that will teach us and all of our clients what works and what doesn't, who works well and who doesn't, who fulfils my needs and who doesn't.

The danger, as any ethically conscious psychotherapist will tell you, is that some people may get badly hurt. But do they? And isn't getting hurt part of life and one of the ways we learn? And isn't it perhaps patronising of us to think that we can protect people from their hurt? Maybe, having been misunderstood or mistreated by a less competent practitioner (or even a very competent one!) they go away, lick their wounds and learn something valuable that helps them choose better next time. I know that in the process of my own learning some people have been less than happy with me, and sometimes I haven't seen them again. I hope perhaps they have found someone who suits them better and works with them better than I did. Some people had the self-support to be able to tell me, which certainly helped me.

At the same time I would hope that anyone wishing to work with people at the more personal end of the spectrum would see it as part of their evolvment as a competent practitioner to familiarise themselves with current trauma theories and practice, making sure that they have good information and recognition about the more vulnerable psychological processes. This would seem to me to be part of our own internal ethical and self-evaluating process,

About Standardisation:

As constellations facilitators, we find ourselves in this most extraordinarily privileged position. Through what I can only see as a wonderful serendipity we find ourselves as part of something radically new, something that in its practice manifestly transcends any particular profession or discipline, something that at present is free, evolving, self-organising, exploratory, experimental and as far as I can see has found no boundaries to the possibilities of its use. This is truly a gift that is rare. And we may tinker with that at our peril.

As Judith points out in her contribution, in the psychotherapeutic field, particularly in the UK, we have experiences over the last 50 years of the effect of moving into accreditation, regularisation and standardisation, and as one effect we have seen how much this can tame and even suppress the exuberance of the new. As a Gestalt therapist, I read with wonder accounts of creative therapies in the '60's and '70's and indeed experienced some of this wonder, and some of the not so good things about it. This has caused me to reflect on what happened later as the urge to make many of these new disciplines recognised and accepted in the wider societal field and to "protect" people from "bad practice" forced us to set up associations, governing bodies, training standards, codes of ethics, codes of practice and finally complaints procedures. And as soon as you have a "Complaints Procedure" sure as eggs are eggs you will get complaints... put something in the field and the field will make use of it.

This then, in my view, has led to an increasingly paranoid and self-protective mood, which in turn encourages people to relinquish their own authority as to what is good practice, thereby rendering them less. The compromises that psychotherapy (particularly the humanistic tradition) in Great Britain has made in the endeavour to become acceptable and a valid discipline to work within our government financed organisations such as our National Health Service, have been great. Our standardised trainings are academic and dry, our requirements of students increase almost every year (generally in this country

a psychotherapy training already runs at 6 to 7 years and is now not considered valid unless tied to a University degree programme). The liveliness that abounded in the '70's and '80's has dried up. We are out on a limb and don't know how to get back. It is now manifestly evident that having all of this supposedly supportive structure does not necessarily contribute to better therapy, does not necessarily protect the public and in the end has stifled the creativity and experimental nature of psychotherapy generally.

I am against any kind of standardisation within the constellations field. I don't think we need it as a post-graduate kind of work and the danger is it stifles experimentation and evolvment. It says: this is the right way and that is the wrong... it sets up authorities and diminishes the student. It attempts to set boundaries on the work that are also likely to limit it and diminish it. It makes the standard-makers into the powerful leaders and the work the servant, whereas really the process of constellations is the leader and we the servants of it. We may say we want to "protect" the work by doing these things, but why on earth does this work need protecting? It is itself as it is, in some ways quite beyond us. Who are we to think of protecting it?

Moreover, as Judith questions, who oversees the overseers? Every time we agree to any kind of outside authority we give up on a piece of ourselves, that part of ourselves that, if we listen, knows very well whether I should be doing this or not... The more we rely on others to tell us, the less we learn to develop our own authority. The moment we defer any piece of our inner ability to make good judgements to another we diminish ourselves, and the moment we start to authorise over another we diminish them. Of course we must confer with our colleagues and peers... even take advice, but all such advice needs to be settled in us and tasted and touched by that part of ourselves that knows. Indeed it is often in that contact that we have the space to listen to that part of ourselves.

I remember sitting in a workshop as a participant when there was a very heated debate between a number of very qualified psychotherapists as to whether a certain intervention was ethical... the ethics of one side of the debate were primarily informed by the requirement to "do no harm" and others were arguing as to who could decide for someone what was harmful and how and so on... very heated it was. Suddenly the facilitator said to one of the members: "You don't trust your feelings... you are not in touch with your feelings." Needless to say this was a very confronting thing to say to a psychotherapist. Nevertheless I thought about that for a long time. About what feelings in myself I can trust and what feelings I can't and why. This may seem like a digression but follow me a bit: I had a military childhood, my father was in the Royal Air Force, and military band music always gets me... it makes me very emotional and in touch with very strong feelings of pride, nationalistic fervour and patriotism... and yet, if I think about it, I don't agree with any of these things. I understand in my "sensible" self how divisive patriotism is, how dangerous jingoistic thinking is. And if I am in my "sensible" self I avoid that sort of thing like the plague. And yet the hard-wired effect is always there. These feelings I don't trust as having value in most situations that I am in. (I just don't know right now whether there could be a situation where they would be worth trusting.... I doubt it). In any case I understood what the facilitator meant: when I listen deeply to myself in a difficult situation, even when it means that I have to admit to something I really don't want to, that it hurts a lot, that perhaps I have to change something really important and profound in myself... This is my authority, the foundation of my ethics, and in my opinion we should be more concerned with supporting people to listen to this in themselves than to supporting people to project their authority outwards onto others and obey rules and standards.

For those who came first it is enormously challenging to persistently side-step the seductive invitation by those who come later to become their authority. It's not about not acknowledging that one may know more about a thing, and teaching to others what one knows. It's about giving freely of one's wisdom and experience and at the same time honouring the other's authority, their own wisdom and experience. It's an extremely challenging and delicate balance, and for those who receive these powerful projections constant vigilance is required not to fall into the trap. For those who came later, if we invest others with an authority over us in the end they must fail us. They will, in the end, not see us; by projecting our

authority on to them we make ourselves invisible to them. We will in the end be disappointed, feel let down and betrayed by them.

Training

Like Diane's experience, in the training we run we get people from a wide variety of professions, and I have tried to hold our training in content and style as openly as possible so that all who are interested can feel welcomed and catered for. At the same time I have been aware that those who seriously want to take their involvement with this work further need more support than a year's training offers. As our starting point, with all of the students who join our training we require that they have a sufficient qualification for the work that they do and that they intend to use the material they will gain in our training. (I am not against qualifications per se, although as you will have gathered I do think they are given far too much power... but I am talking from the view of constellations as an 'alongside' discipline which, in my view, therefore escapes this necessity.)

So we now have what we call a Certificate Programme. Primarily this came into being to provide those who wanted to take their involvement in the work further after having completed our standard training year with a structure to do so. It aims to provide a useful structure of "further education" suggestions and support. It is just that and we make it clear that it provides no accreditation and that there is no formal assessment. They are encouraged to have a training consultant, who works with them to design their journey. If they want any feedback for anything they have done they are encouraged to get a collaborative kind of assessment from their peers, colleagues and the training consultant, but above all we try and impress on them that in the end as far as we are concerned they are their own authority. We believe that by doing this their ability to self-monitor (sometimes with the help of others) is heightened. The Certificate that we provide when they have completed their Log form (which is just a log of what they have done) will only record what they have done. Nothing more. Nowhere will it say that any authority other than themselves has judged them in any way.

I don't know how this will work. We are in the early stages at the moment and time will tell. But I like the intention, and I think it is an intention that is honouring of this work.

Associations

I was at the initial meeting in Cologne in June 2006 that was set up to look at the issue of bringing into being an international association. The result has been ISCA, The International Systemic Constellations Association. At the time I had some strong misgivings about the business of setting up an international association, in particular I couldn't understand what the purpose was and I still don't.

I know that it often happens around this time in the evolution of something new, that people want to organise it in some way, to protect it, seemingly to preserve it. I know also that the essential intentions of those involved are usually honourable, and I believe that this is the case with the setting up of ISCA. But back in June 2006, I didn't want this to happen just because this is what usually happens. I wanted us to try and think clearly about what real benefit this would offer and what purpose it would fulfil and whether these things really required such a structure. Would an association really serve the work of constellations? I wanted us to try and reach for something that was perhaps as radical and new as the work of constellations is itself.

At the meeting there were a number of people present from different countries who wanted an overall governing body to give them authority and status. Some clearly wanted to have training procedures and standards. Most of them were relatively on their own in their country as facilitators of constellations, and it was clear that this sense of isolation spurred their interest in being part of a greater whole. But the greater whole is already there! We are already a community.

At the time I was also afraid of the seductiveness of ambition, self-protectiveness and power, the strong feelings in the meeting room at the time, certainly in me, were frightening and an enormous cause of concern to me.

Two years down the line I am clearer about my resistance to an international association. Apart from all the things I have outlined above as to how something as free and unfettered as constellations risks becoming static and reified, ruled and authorised, I think that the setting up of an international association is an agent of divisiveness, it profoundly splits our community into those who become members and those who don't. Regardless of what the function and purpose of an association is, its existence immediately splits the field, immediately toughens up boundaries around itself, and heightens issues of inclusion and exclusion. It forces the question: "are you with us or are you not (or: are you against us)?" and forces each one of us to have to make a decision: to join or not (and "waiting and seeing" is still a decision). It brings up questions for each one of us such as: "What will happen if I don't? Will I still be acceptable in the field? Where, then, is my place?"

I personally don't see what having an association gives us that we don't already have. I can communicate with anyone in the loosely structured constellations community that I want. I can tune into any number of chat links and email distribution lists. I can train where I want, talk with who I want, feel pretty equal with most and so on. This is not to say that these things will not still be available if there is an association but such a massive intervention in the field affects us all, those who join and those who choose not to. How will I talk to someone who has joined if I choose not to join? Will that have an effect? And, most terrifying question of all: Will those who become members unavoidably feel superior to those who don't? Which of course is the classic personal conscience issue.

I don't like being put into such an impossible position, where I cannot **not** choose, where the very existence of something forces me to make a choice that, in the choosing, contributes to the splitting of a field, a field that I love and have passion for as it is. And what may the consequences down the line be that I cannot foresee?

So: no I don't support tying constellations to psychotherapy, I don't support a process of standardisation and I don't support the setting up of an association.

I feel passionately protective of this precious, relatively unstructured, vibrant, lively, challenging, troublesome at times, organic, fertile, self-organising, fluctuating and beautiful field that I have the most unbelievable fortune to be a part of.

What might happen if we just left it alone, if we submit to its will rather than trying to get it to submit to ours? Truly *that* would be a radical experiment worthy of Constellations and worthy of us.