INTRODUCTION

This article contains three sections:

Section 1. Hellinger's Systemic Constellations – a description of the principles and practices.

This section includes a brief description of the work itself (the practice) and a discussion of key principles Hellinger has articulated about his practice. In addition, a summary is provided of the available English literature on the roots of the practice to orient the reader to the discussion that follows. Since Hellinger's work encompasses a span of now nearly 30 years, and his work has changed over the years, I will explain what he means by "systemic constellations." As most of the sources quoted for the practice stem from the psychological literature (even though there is evidence that Hellinger himself draws more deeply from philosophical sources such as Heidegger and Lao Tzu), I will briefly summarize these. In the subsequent sections, I hope to construct a more naturalistic and sociological basis for Hellinger's work.

Section 2. Systemic constellations as a form of practice viewed from the standpoint of natural systems via the current theories describing complexity. (A natural system being nature as observed and conceptualized by human beings.)

This section explores how systemic constellations may or may not be considered a systemic practice from the viewpoint of complex adaptive systems and complexity theory. I examine the hypothesis that the Orders of Love, Hellinger's simple principles

regarding the behavior of family systems and the action of conscience in a family, could

be explained as simple rules that create the complex behavior observed in the many forms

of constellations encountered in the practice. Structural coupling is explored as a

metaphor for understanding how family traumas are passed down from one generation to

the next. The "knowing field" is briefly discussed as an emergent property of human

social interaction.

Section 3. Social Constructionism is explored as a viewpoint from which to evaluate the

practice of systemic constellations.

This section explores basic assertions of social constructionism and compares them to

Hellinger's writings and practices. The dialectic between modernism and social

construction is also explored. Hellinger's work is brought in as a third voice in this

conversation. The final portion of this section contains my conclusions and reflections as

a result of writing this article.

SECTION 1: HELLINGER'S SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATION WORK

> **The Wind of Fate**
> *In a group, a man told how, as a boy, he had sat on a high hill and watched his*
> *village being attacked and destroyed by neighbors who belonged to another*
> *religion. He described his hatred toward those men, some of whom he had known*
> *and liked. He told how a thought had come unbidden as he watched: What would*
> *I feel if I had been born into one of those families? What if a wind had blown my*
> *soul a few hundred meters off course, and I had entered the belly of one of those*
> *mothers, instead of my own mother? Then I would feel victory and pride, as they*
> *do, and not grief and rage, as I do—and I would hate us and love them.*
> --Hellinger (1998)

> ### *How Can We Know Peace?*
> *In a television documentary, a young man was filmed beside a cave. Many thousands of bodies had been found in the cave, lying in three layers. The bodies in the first layer were those of adherents to a particular political persuasion who had been murdered by adherents to another group in retribution for injustices done. The bodies in the second layer were those of members of the second party murdered in retribution some years later by members of the first. The tide of power in that country had shifted again, and the third layers again contained bodies of members of the first party murdered, in retribution, by their enemies. The young man, whose relatives were among the bodies in the middle layer killed almost 50 years previously, was asked if there would be an end to the killing. He replied, "When we hear the cries of our mothers, and see their tears for their murdered sons, how can we know peace? We must avenge their loss.*
> --Hellinger (1998)

"The man in this documentary believed he was acting freely, but he was not. Because he loved blindly, he was caught in a web of tragedy that had begun long before he was born, demanded his obedience, and, tragically, will not end until long after his death."

Hellinger (1998)

Bert Hellinger is a controversial and colorful psychoanalyst now entering his eighties. In the early 1980's while working with family systems in a group therapy setting, he stumbled across a phenomenon that has come to be known variously as family or organizational constellations or, a more encompassing term, systemic constellation work (SCW) Later developments have been called "movement of the soul" and "movement of the spirit mind." This work represents a lifetime of exploration by a creative thinker and explorer in the field of family systems dynamics. In the last ten years Hellinger's systemic constellation work has spread rapidly and is now practiced in over 33 countries worldwide.[1] Also during this time, this way of working has been successfully expanded to organizational consulting, education, corporate branding, prison work, and health and

medical issues, including chronic illness and addiction, to name a few of the main fields

that are experimenting with systemic constellation work.

As a practitioner of this work myself for the past eight years, I have worked in Europe,

Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Canada, Mexico and the United States. As is true

for all facilitators I have spoken with, I have found that the constellation work seems to

have a universal appeal. I am indebted to Bert Hellinger for the practical wisdom and

challenging honesty he has brought to his pursuit of understanding the complex dynamics

of family systems. It would not be amiss to say that this work has significantly changed

my life for the better and also given me an unexpected and personally enriching

livelihood (a "learning-hood" as I like to call it.) Since I am deeply involved in this

practice, I cannot be considered to be a neutral observer of this work and cannot help but

bring my own experiences and biases into the perspective I take in exploring

constellation work through the lenses of complexity theory and social constructionism. I

ask the reader to keep that in mind while reading this article.

As the reader knows, there are a variety of ways that this work is done. The most

traditional is: 1) Facilitator evokes and clarifies the client's issue; 2) Representatives for

the significant members of the client's system are chosen and placed by the client; 3)

Representatives report on their experience; 4) Facilitator experiments with different

positions and movements of the representatives; 5) When possible, a final resolution is

achieved.

As a practitioner and a trainer of this work I see four important claims made by Hellinger

that are germane to this paper.

1. Trans-generational patterns exist in family systems.

2. It is possible to represent members of the system with other people who do not know

the client or the people in the system.

3. Common kinds of orders patterns or "hidden symmetries" emerge in intimate relations

between people.

4. The body knows what the mind does not about our relationships.

1. Trans-generational Patterns in Family Systems.

The young ones are the future of the old ones. Somé (1993)

First is the claim that events that happen in an earlier generation may affect members of

the system in later generations even though these later descendants may not be directly

aware of the entanglement. This is, of course, not a new claim. Working in the

constellation format, Hellinger, like many family therapists and theorists before him,

builds upon models of the trans-generational nature of disturbances in family systems.

What is unresolved in one generation seems to be picked up by the next and continued in

often hard to understand ways. Clarifying the nature of these trans-generational patterns

is one of the chief contributions that Hellinger's work has made to the field of family

therapy. Virginia Satir and others such as Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagi, Murray Bowen, and

Eric Berne have certainly pointed to this phenomenon. More similarities can be found

with geno-sociogram therapists such as Anne Ancelin Schutzenberger. Hellinger,

however, extended this trans-generational work much more thoroughly, including

exploring the larger historical and cultural contexts that impact the fate of individuals and

family systems, as the quotes opening this section indicate.

Besides the surprising synchronicities and accuracy of events that are represented

spontaneously in the constellations themselves, Hellinger supports his claims of trans-

generational patterns through the concept (also formulated by others) of identification of

a family member of one generation with a member of a previous generation, typically a

member who has been excluded by the family.

> "Identification is like a systemic repetition compulsion. It attempts to recreate and
> reproduce the past in order to bring justice to an excluded person. But such justice
> is primitive and blind, and it brings no resolution. In this dynamic, later persons
> become entangled in the destiny of an earlier person. Even if their actions are
> motivated by love, they take upon themselves an inappropriate responsibility. A
> later person can't set something in order for an earlier person after the fact. Such a
> retroactive justice only continues the systemic imbalance indefinitely."
> (Hellinger, 1998)

An example of these trans-generational entanglements is the "double shift" where the fate

of the original protagonist is picked up by a different "subject" in a subsequent

generation, and the "object" of the original event is then projected onto someone else in

the family. I will share a case from my own work to illustrate this trans-generational

phenomenon.

Example of a "double shift" trans-generational identification

A woman had been angry with her husband for no reason that she could ascertain since early in their marriage. [1] The couple had a nine-year-old daughter. The husband, by all accounts of those who knew him well, was a very decent man and put up with considerable verbal abuse from his wife. Neither of them could really understand her anger at him, although over the years the wife had justified it with various stories. In addition the wife had a physical symptom that she was concerned about that was related to her respiratory system and inner organs, and experienced as a consistent chest pain. Because the wife was the most concerned about the issue, I asked her to place the representatives in the constellation.

As soon as the wife had placed representatives in the constellation for herself, her husband and their child, the wife's representative started coughing and had an intense feeling of being strangled or choked. She also reported chest pains and difficulty breathing. The son's representative felt very shaky and wanted to look away from his mother. He felt better when I moved him closer to the father's representative. The father's representative was perplexed by his wife's behavior, but felt quite solid.

When I asked the wife who in her family or origin had been strangled or had been choked, at first she could not think of any one. The husband and wife discussed her family system for a few minutes. Finally, the wife remembered that her aunt had committed suicide by self-strangulation. The mention of the aunt relieved the wife's

[1] Details in all cases presented from my own work have been changed in order to keep confidential the identity of the clients.

representative a little. Although the aunt had had a husband and small children, she had become involved with another man and wanted to leave her husband for the lover. The lover spurned the aunt and in shame and anger she had hung herself.

The wife added representatives to the constellation for her mother and the aunt. As soon as these representatives were placed, the wife's representative began to relax. She did not look at the representative of her mother; instead, the wife's representative's focus went to the representative for the aunt. The representative for the aunt was very uncomfortable, both physically and emotionally, and also had felt tightness in the throat. The wife's mother's representative was horrified, grief-stricken and also deeply ashamed of her younger sister's act and found it very difficult to look at her. Instead, her daughter's representative (the wife's representative) looked at the aunt. The wife reported that the shame in the family was so great that this trauma was very seldom discussed and the aunt rarely mentioned.

The wife suddenly realized she had assumed the aunt's violent but ineffectual rage towards her lover, but instead directed it to her husband. As it turns out her husband was born and grew up in the same village where the lover was from. The wife said she always hated "those people" though she couldn't say why, and yet she had married one. Up until that moment she had not made the connection between her husband's origins and her aunt's history.

In this case, the wife was identified, or entangled, with the aunt, (shift of "subject") and, out of a blind loyalty to the excluded aunt, she directed the anger she felt in the system not to the aunt's lover, but towards her own husband (shift of "object").

In light of this constellation, both the wife's physical symptom and her behavior towards her husband began to make sense to both of them. She could now begin to see her husband for him, and leave her aunt's difficulties and fate with the aunt. The husband came up to me a day later and thanked me for the constellation. He had begun to doubt his sanity because his wife's repeated attacks had made no sense to him in the context of his own history and his actions towards her.

At no time did any of us doing the constellation judge this aunt or her actions as either good or bad. The wife did not know many of the details of the aunt's situation in any case. The trauma experienced by the family and the systemic nature of the wife's entanglement became clearer, and the wife was able to look at the representative for her aunt and say lovingly, "I see you had a difficult time, and I leave your troubles with you. You made your choices and I will make mine. Please look friendly on me if I have a good relationship with my husband."

This example serves to illustrate the very common trans-generational patterns of entanglement that seem to occur between the generations. It is almost as if problems that aren't solved by one generation are picked up by the next, often without knowledge of the exact situation, and attempts are made by the young ones--the "future of the old ones"--

to use Somé's phrase, to resolve these problems on behalf of the family system. In this

way misery seems to perpetuate itself in some families.

2. Representation of members of the system by other people.

> *It has recently been discovered that there is communication between trees of the
> same species. The discovery followed the experiment of a group of sadistic
> scientists (as they must sometimes be to do experimental work!), who removed all
> the leaves from a tree to see how it would behave. The tree reacted as expected,
> that is, by increasing its secretion of sap in order to replace the leaves that had
> been removed. The tree also secreted a certain substance that protects it from
> parasites. The tree knew full well it had been attacked by a parasite, but the poor
> thing thought the parasite was an insect. It did not understand that it was the
> greatest of parasites—human beings. What is interesting, however, is that the
> neighboring trees of the same species started secreting the same antiparasitic
> substance as the tree that had been attacked. Thus, intercommunication exists in
> the world of unicellular organisms, in the plant world, and, it goes without
> saying, in the animal world."*
> --Edgar Morin (2002, in Schnitman & Schnitman)

The second important claim is reflected in the above quote, and that is that the

representatives, who often know nothing about the family system or individuals for

whom they stand, can provide relatively accurate information about the system for the

client. We have no idea how this occurs. However, in case after case representatives will

enact body symptoms, say phrases or demonstrate emotions that they have no way to

know about prior to their involvement in the client's constellation. Here is what Hellinger

(2001) says about this phenomenon:

> HELLINGER: "When representatives are composed and centered and allow
> themselves to go with what's happening, they spontaneously do everything
> necessary without instructions from the therapist. This is far more powerful and
> convincing than if I were to tell them what to do. …

> LINZ: How do you explain the fact that the systemic dynamics really do come to light in family constellations?
> HELLINGER: I can't explain it, but we can see that it happens. When participants in a family constellation are placed in relationship to one another, they are no longer exclusively themselves but experience in their bodies the symptoms and feelings of the persons they represent. Sometimes they even suffer from their physical symptoms. A little while ago in a workshop for ill people, there was a man who suffered from epilepsy. … At one point in the constellation, his representative started twitching, as if he were having an epileptic fit, and he couldn't stop until we resolved the family situation. So you see, that's one example of direct, immediate knowledge and feeling above and beyond that which we know or feel in the normal course of events. … It's usually possible to see whether a participant in a family constellation is reacting to the family dynamics or is creating a role as an actor might." (Hellinger, 2001, p. 439)

Several "scientific" explanations have been advanced to explain this phenomenon, the

best of which is probably the use of Bell's Theorem[2] - a quantum physics theory that

implies the possibility of "action at a distance" and which has recently been proven

experimentally – as an analogy for these experiences. Sheldrake (1995) has put forward

the controversial theory of morphogenetic fields, "a hypothetical biological (and

potentially social) field that contains the information necessary to shape the exact form of

a living thing, as part of its epigenetics, and may also shape its behavior and coordination

with other beings (see also morphogenesis). It should be noted that this theory is not

accepted by a majority of the scientific community."[3] Practitioners of systemic

constellation work have dubbed the source of information that representatives seem able

to access the "knowing field." This is one of the core credibility issues facing Hellinger's

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[2] http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/kenny/papers/bell.html. An article titled, Spooky Action at a Distance: an explanation of Bell's Theorem, by Gary Felder, Ph.D., professor of mathematics at Smith College, Northampton, MA is a good entry to this concept and the "proof" so far. Briefly, the proof of Bell's Theorem shows that the quantum state of "entangled" quantum particles remain connected even when separated, and a change in the state of one simultaneously occurs with a change in the state of the other, i.e., action at a distance.
[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morphogenetic_fields. Accessed on 4.15.06.

work: most of us find this claim hard to believe until we experience the "otherness" of

standing as a representative and hear the confirming reports of the client whose family

member we represented, or something we could not know comes out of our mouth and is

affirmed by the client. I can offer no solutions to this problem, other than to speak of my

own experience and to offer the reports of my clients, fellow facilitators and my students.

3. The emergence of common orders or "hidden symmetry" in intimate relations.

> *Tolstoy suggested that all happy families are the same, but that unhappy ones are*
> *unhappy in their own unique ways. My experience tells me it is just the other way*
> *around: it is the unhappy (blind) systems that regularly fall into the same old*
> *predictable scenarios, and that only with system sight can one create uncharted*
> *futures.* Oshry (1999)

Hellinger's principles are a mix of psychotherapy and social philosophy, empiricism and

phenomenology (with a pinch of Heidegger, Heraclitus and Lao Tzu for spice). None-the-

less, patterns seem to be emerging from this way of working that have explanatory power

for understanding the complex and often confusing dynamics of family (and

organizational) systems. I will touch on three core principles that are found in his

writings and that he often discusses in his workshops: systemic feelings, conscience, and

the Orders of Love.

Systemic Feelings

First, Hellinger claims that people can have "systemic" feelings, that is, that they can feel emotions or compulsions to act that do not belong to their own life circumstances, but are the emotions or compulsions of a member of a previous generation.

> The dynamics of a family bind all members in full participation. … In this way, any family member can become blindly entangled in other members' debts and privileges; in their thoughts, cares, and feelings; and in their conflicts or goals. Individual happiness and suffering are limited in the interests of the family, just as a whole constrains its parts. …unless individual members gain insight into its dynamic and transform it, they unknowingly submit to the laws of blind systemic justice—an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth. Then the damage is passed from one generation to the next, and the extended family finds no peace. … The drive for balance working in the family group is more fundamental than love, and it readily sacrifices individual love and happiness to maintain the larger family equilibrium. (Hellinger, 1998)

He further distinguishes between four different kinds of feelings: primary, secondary, systemic and meta. "…primary feelings support constructive action, while secondary feelings consume energy that could otherwise support change." (Hellinger, 1998) Primary feelings provide the impetus to move forward in the face of difficult or painful situations; they have depth and power, and lack any unnecessary drama. Secondary feelings on the other hand often cover a personal "guilt." As Hellinger puts it, "Their primary function is to convince others that one can't take effective action, so they need to be dramatic and exaggerated." (1998) Secondary feelings enroll others as helpers and weaken the person who has them. They generally require a lot of drama and people eventually tire of them. In a group, a facilitator can quickly tell when a secondary feeling is occupying center stage. The group becomes restless and fidgety. If someone is deep in a primary feeling, the group is riveted. As Hellinger says, "Primary feelings only go so far as is good. …the feeling itself has a very precise shame boundary…. Secondary feelings don't have the same shame boundary, and it's quite possible to make a fool of

yourself when expressing secondary feelings." (1998) One fascinating sentence that

Hellinger uses addressing this distinction between primary and secondary feelings is the

phrase, "What have I done to you that I am so angry with you?" This is where a

secondary feeling of anger is covering a primary emotion of perhaps shame, fear or guilt.

I've seen this sentence; uttered by a representative, make some interesting and

devastatingly accurate appearances in couple's constellations.

Both primary and secondary feelings are different from systemic feelings. This third type

of feeling is one that has been taken over from the family (or organizational) system.

These feelings often have a strange intensity or lack of clear focus, as if they are larger or

more diffuse than the person who has them. They may be experienced as an odd

compulsion, such as the example given early, where the wife felt irritated at her husband

for no apparent reason. Since in Western culture we have come to believe that we "own"

our feelings, generate them within our own skin so to speak, systemic feelings can be

very perplexing and resistant to our attempts to change them through personal therapy.

An example of this was a case I participated in as a representative.

Example of an organizational secondary feeling

In a small manufacturing company of roughly 35 employees, the managing director was

struggling with how to fill the marketing function. Should he have one of his main

department heads take the job, should he do it, should he hire someone? He was very

indecisive and a bit defensive about the situation; however, the lack of a marketing focus

was becoming a problem for the company. At the facilitator's request, the director placed

representatives for marketing, the product made, the four executive team-members or

department heads, and himself.

I stood in the role of the director and was very uncomfortable looking at the

representative for marketing. Try as the facilitator might, no good place could be found

for marketing in the team. Whenever the representative for marketing was placed by any

other team member or even beside the product, the marketing representative quickly

became anxious and the team member became very ill at ease. Finally the facilitator

asked what had happened in the past regarding marketing and the director. The director

confessed that at his previous company in the course of less than a year, he had hired, and

then fired, four different people for a marketing position. None of them had been

allowed to stay long enough to find out if they could actually do the job. The reasons for

firing had more to do with the director himself. As the representative for the director, I

felt both a deep pang of guilt and discomfort for the suffering these four people went

through – thinking they had a job, only to be fired shortly thereafter – and relief that I

didn't have to continue trying to hide my discomfort. The facilitator had representatives

for the four former marketing managers placed and the director's representative

apologized to each one. The representative for marketing then took a deep breath and

relaxed and stood closer to the representative of the director.

In this case a systemic feeling followed the marketing job. Each member of the team

somehow "knew" it wasn't "safe" and was uncomfortable with taking the job from this

director. Once the director (who was observing the constellation) could see the effects his

action was having on the team, he decided not to hire another manager for that position

for the time being, but instead to do it himself. Sorting out systemic feelings from

primary or secondary feelings is important in recognizing the issue that is really driving

the system.

The final type of feeling Hellinger describes is "meta-feelings." These are feelings like

courage, serenity, remorse, and wisdom. They are like a pure energy or sensation, and

seem to exist beyond our normal emotional range. "We might call it a conscience of a

higher order. Sometimes it's the only thing that keeps us from going along when our

group is caught up in something destructive." (1998, p. 229)

Conscience

The second "hidden order" is the paradoxical role of conscience in human systems.

Hellinger (1998) defines conscience this way: "Conscience is a perceptual organ for

systemic balance that helps us to know whether or not we're in harmony with our

reference system. It warns us if what we're about to do carries the consequences of being

excluded from the system or assures our continued belonging to the system." Hellinger

makes a distinction between the consequences of our actions in terms of "good" or "evil"

deeds and a "good" or "bad" conscience. In other words, people can do horrible things

(like fly planes into tall buildings full of other people) with a clean conscience.

Conscience then, becomes a great pretender, telling us that it will help us to "do the right thing" when in fact it tells us only how to maintain membership in our group. With a clean conscience we can do things to those outside our group that would never be acceptable treatment for members within our group. The feelings of "guilt" and "innocence" are merely the servants of conscience and have no bearing on the moral quality of our actions. In fact, Hellinger says, "…by binding us so firmly to the groups that are necessary for our survival, *our feelings of guilt and innocence often blind us to what is good and evil*." (1998) Conscience acts on us like a hidden organizer, making sure we stay in alignment with our system. It takes a great act of insight and it often requires considerable courage to leave the perspective of the original familial conscience and follow the path to a broader perspective of the consequences of our actions.

The Orders of Love

This leads to the third and final "hidden orders" and those are what Hellinger has termed the "Orders of Love." Hellinger describes three simple guidelines and claims that these simple "orders" organize the complex behavior we see in family system. These are:

> 1. The need to belong, that is, for bonding.
> 2. The need to maintain a balance of giving and taking, that is, for equilibrium.
> 3. The need for the safety of social convention and predictability, that is, for order. (1998, p. 5)

This last includes our felt sense of hierarchy, as in the first born child is first in the family and, in the case of an early death, cannot be "replaced" by a later child, or our innate sense of which director has been with organization the longest, which is newest, etc. One cannot buy a place as an original founder of an organization, for example. The founders

were in fact the ones who were there at the beginning and founded the enterprise.

Attempts to "buy in" as a later "founder" often fail. These are basic descriptions of events

– for example, what happened first, what happened second, what happened most recently.

Whole books have been written on how these orders play out in human systems, and I

will not attempt to repeat what has been said here. In the next section, we will explore an

explanation for the power of these simple organizing principles from the perspective of

complexity theory. Suffice it to say that these simple statements and the quixotic nature

of conscience take a while to grasp, like the wind rustling the leaves of trees, and, though

we cannot see it directly, its effect can be felt. A final thought on conscience from *Love's*

Hidden Symmetry (Hellinger, 1998)

> Conscience serves all these needs even when they conflict with one another, and
> we experience the conflicts between them as conflicts of conscience. Whoever
> reaches towards innocence with respect to one need simultaneously reaches
> toward guilt with respect to another; whoever rents out a room in the house of
> innocence soon discovers that he or she has sublet to guilt as well. No matter how
> we struggle to follow our conscience, we always feel *both* guilt and innocence—
> innocence with respect to one need and guilt with respect to another. The dream
> of innocence without guilt is an illusion.

4. The body knows what the mind does not about our relationships.

*"Everything I know in the world, I know because of my body. My body with all its senses
working, intact, is my organ of consciousness, and through it all that we have created
and call life, I know and call my own."* Guenther (in Nagata, 2002)

Several years ago I found myself not feeling well and stuck in a Hilton hotel room with

nothing to do for an afternoon. In the drawer of the nightstand by my bed, along with a

copy of the Gideon Bible, was a copy of Hilton's autobiography. The book detailed the

successful rise to prominence of the founder of the Hilton hotels. With time on my hands,

I started reading. Hilton clearly accomplished a lot during his time. The one thing that has

stuck with me from his story was that he always trusted his gut when it came to making a

business deal. He related in fair detail the one time he didn't listen to his gut, and the deal

was a disaster. I can't say that this strategy would work for everyone, yet we all know

when we have a "gut feeling" that something isn't right, or "our heart has one idea" and

"our head another." What is this knowledge of the body? Those times we can't put

something into words, our body is often talking in its own language. It seems we need an

epistemology of the body.

Bentz and Kenny (in Nagata, 2002) make an interesting distinction between "body-in-

world" (BIW) and "body-as-world" (BAW) that seems pertinent here:

> A BIW exists prior to the textual world and has immediately imposed upon it all
> the attributes of the pretextual world. This pretextual world lacks the continuity
> and form which is [sic] brought forth by intellectual activity. Thus it is ultimately
> inaccurate to speak of the body in the world, for the body and its immediate world
> of experience are one. It is rather a case of body as the world (BAS). At this
> ontological level, there is no distinction between the body and the world. We
> learn through language to make this distinction. Beneath the thought which makes
> this distinction there is always a BAW which remains the foundation of human
> life.

Body-as-world then points to the way that our experience of world is constructed through

our direct experience of being in a human body. We "know" our world through our

senses and perception, and our physical form uniquely shapes those. This body-as-world

seems to know implicitly "where we stand" in relationship to other members of our

systems. When a client really is in touch with his or her felt sense of where she stands

relative to the others in the system, remarkable and astonishingly clear information can

come to light. Our bodies are actually "in" relationship, both with our environment and with other people's bodies. In our overheated mental worlds, where words on an electronic screen substitute for face-to-face relationships it is easy to overlook the obvious physicality of being human. We experience relationship – whether in the same room or in the depths of a computer-built game world – through the medium of our physical bodies.

I often do a quick demonstration of this when I do an introductory workshop. Using a volunteer from the group I stand beside the person close enough that I can reach out and grab their arm. I ask the group to look at this relationship and get a feeling in their body about what it "means." Then I take one step sideways so I can no longer touch the person I am standing beside, and I ask the same question. Instantly, breathing and facial expressions change in the group watching this. This "positioning" "means" something different *to our bodies* about the relationship being represented by the two of us. I cannot explain why this is. It seems, however, that in our theory building we have missed something powerfully plain and obvious. What we can physically do to another person isn't trivial. People instinctively seem to *know* who would win in a fistfight. People *know* who is older in a room full of people. What is it that we know by being "bodies-as-worlds" in relationship to other bodies? Whatever this phenomenon is, constellation work makes use of it.

In simply placing people in space relative to an inner feeling of relationship, we are able to tap into something meaningful that sheds useful light on relationship difficulties. There

are no real words for this kind of "language" of bodies in space. Proxemics, the general

study of socially accepted distances between people with different kinds of relationships,

doesn't begin to reach the deeper symbolic relational level or spatial placement that

carries specific information about a specific family's history. It seems we are in the realm

of the ineffable where words fail us, and we have only the greater Mystery that organizes

human communication as our companion. (Pearce, 1998) Native peoples have known of

this place for a long time and perhaps in their languages we will find the words we need

to explain what is happening in a constellation. In the meantime, at the edge of the

Mystery is where you will find Hellinger's work.

How this work is being positioned by other writers in the field

The reader should keep in mind that I only have access to published work in English.

There is a great trove of work written in German that I cannot read and therefore will

undoubtedly omit important critiques of Hellinger's work. There is also a fair amount of

writing now in Spanish, which, alas I also do not read fluently enough to use for this

article. The writing in English by other authors about Hellinger's work falls into two

broad categories: elaborators—those who elaborate on or add to his basic work, and

vengeful critics—those who have a personal vendetta against Hellinger and attack him as

a cult figure and Nazi. I will ignore the second group, which seems to consist of a single

writer who penned incoherent attacks on some of Hellinger's books and posted these as

"book reviews" on amazon.com early this year. (These have since been removed.) I will

divide the writers in the first group into three categories based on their theoretical

perspectives. I will call these: 1) therapeutic, 2) procedural or process-oriented, and 3)

shamanic. I am aware of no other English articles at this time by serious critics of

Hellinger's work though such may exist.

Franke (2003), Franke-Grischke (2003) and Zawidowski (1999) all fall into the

therapeutic category. Zawidowski strays perhaps the farthest from Hellinger's original

perspective. He calls the work "single session family staging" and borrows language

from theatre more reminiscent of psychodrama than constellations, at least as practiced in

the U.S. Zawidowski attempts to reduce the poetic and sometimes preachy language of

Hellinger's original writings into a discourse more likely to be accepted by clinical

psychologists (his profession). He supports Hellinger's contention that family bonds form

an essential reference point for many of our meaningful relationships. He clearly

considers the work systemic and points out that the work itself defines the boundaries of

the system for a particular issue. In more technical language he describes some of the

same phenomena, including the sense most facilitators have of working with "something

greater" that guides the process. "…[W]ho precisely is to be included in such a system is

revealed during the individual session, and is not decided by either the client or the

therapist. The work itself reveals where the limits of any particular system are to be

drawn and who is to belong to it. The system has a surprisingly clear way of defining

itself." (Zawidowski, 1999)

Both Zawidowski and Franke (2000) include Boszormenyi-Nagi's (1984) contextual

therapy as a theoretical foundation of Hellinger's approach, and Hellinger himself

acknowledges familiarity with Boszormenyi-Nagi's work. Boszormenyi-Nagi's theory of

the need to balance debts in the family system provides a clear basis for Hellinger's

concepts of the balance of give and take in the family system. Hellinger elaborates on this

foundation, and adds something new in his analysis of the function of conscience in the

service of belonging in the family system. Hellinger also studied Satir's work and was

familiar with her "family reconstruction" methods, as both Zawidowski and Franke point

out. The main distinction is that Hellinger does not sculpt or put any therapist-directed

input on the constellation other than selecting the initial set of representatives and, in

classical systemic constellations, facilitating the conversation between representatives.

Zawidowski rightly points out that Hellinger was influenced by Janov's primal therapy,

although Hellinger eventually abandoned much of the techniques used by Janov,

particularly after he noticed the difference between primary and secondary emotions.

Franke-Grischke takes a descriptive approach, detailing several cases from her work with

children in the multicultural German school system where she taught for a number of

years.

In their writings, Ulsamer (2003, 2005), Horn and Brick (2005), and Madelung and

Innecken (2004) take a more procedural approach to the work. Madelung and Innecken in

particular describe several elaborations based in Hellinger's work combined with a set of

techniques they call "neuro-gestalt." These books tend to support Hellinger's basic

premises such as the Orders of Love and the role of conscience in family systems and

focus on how to do the work. Horn and Brick take Hellinger's basic concepts into an

organizational context and illustrate these with several case studies.

Van Kampenhout (2001), Mason-Boring (2004) and Stark (2005) veer more into the

mystical side of Hellinger's work; van Kampenhout with a thoughtful and personal

comparison of shamanic method to systemic constellation work, and Stark with an

exploration of body-based psychotherapy, Reichian body types, and experiential

descriptions of his work with Native Americans. Mason Boring takes a novelistic

approach to placing Hellinger's work within her own context as a bicultural Native

American. None of these books takes a critical stance on the philosophical underpinnings

or principles of Hellinger's work. That remains to be done in a constructive manner in

English by other writers. None of these authors seem to reflect Hellinger's own position

on his work. When I first met him he introduced himself, not as a therapist--though he is

a trained psychoanalyst--but as a philosopher. He is more likely to cite Heraclitus and

Lao Tzu than Boszormenyi-Nagi or Freud, and is well read in Heidegger and other

philosophers.

As a last consideration, systemic constellation work is plagued or assisted, depending on

your perspective, by the specter of a renowned and charismatic founder – what's the

work and what's the man? Hellinger has managed to stir up a great deal of controversy in

Germany through his often inflammatory remarks to the press; though he is often

misunderstood and his comments taken out of context, especially regarding Hitler and the

Nazi era. Perhaps it is no coincidence that his work directly addresses the need for

victims and perpetrators to be reconciled. (The reader is referred to a thoughtful paper by

Eva Madelung on our website[4] regarding the dignity of the perpetrator and the collective

guilt carried by German people about this period in Germany's history.) Every country

seems to have skeletons hidden in the closet. Hellinger's work shows how these unquiet

skeletons rattle the doors of our familial closets down through the generations.

*From an indigenous perspective, the individual psyche can be healed only by addressing
one's relationships with the visible worlds of nature and community and one's
relationships with the invisible forces of the ancestors and Spirit allies.* Somé (2006)[5],

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[4] http://www.human-systems-institute.com/ELSCIE/article8.html
[5]http://malidoma.com *Retrieved 4.29.06*

SECTION 2: COMPLEXITY THEORIES & SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS

> *In every age people believe that their universe contains all that is believable and real. Wise men in their palaces, temples, academies, and universities reject the rest as opinion and illusion. Forget all the superstitions of the uneducated and the myths your parents taught you. For behold! Here is the true universe, awesome, vast, and wondrous. The world is an immense tug-of-war with gods and demons pulling on a giant serpent; the world is the handiwork of almighty gods whom we must obey and worship or reap the misfortune of their wrath; the world is a finite geocentric unity of crystalline spheres, the world is a dance of atoms and waves; all else is outworn myth and discredited theory. The scene is timeless. Yesterday there is a false image, today the true face.''* Harrison, *Masks of the Universe (2003)*

> *Old-timers will chuckle and say they've heard this line before. Every decade or so, a grandiose theory comes along, bearing similar aspirations and often brandishing an ominous-sounding C-name. In the 1960's it was cybernetics. In the '70's it was catastrophe theory. Then came chaos theory in the '80's and complexity theory in the '90's.* Strogatz, *Sync (2003) p.285*

As seems fitting for a controversial form of social intervention, in this section of the article I will examine systemic constellation work through the lens of a controversial description of the natural world: complexity theory. Complexity Theory is not a unified theory as much as it is a set of models that describe certain non-linear and peculiar behaviors in living and non-living systems. These are behaviors that are not describable with linear equations – the main tool of scientists until computers unleashed the power of non-linear calculation and the possibility of simulation. From these theories, a few will be explored in more detail to determine whether systemic constellation work could be considered a systemic form of practice in this paradigm.

I will use six questions to guide my analysis in this section. These are:

1. What are the underlying theories or models that are used to construct this paradigm?

2. What is a system from the perspective of complexity theory?

3. What is the definition of systemic practice in the paradigm of complexity theory?

4. How does Hellinger's work fit in this paradigm? What explanatory power does this

    model provide for examining Hellinger's work; what metaphors can be created?

5. What evidence or arguments can be made for or against the use of complexity theory

    as a source domain for these metaphors?

6. How does Hellinger's work qualify or not as a form of systemic practice in this

    paradigm?

1. What are the underlying theories that are used to construct this paradigm?

> *No one was more sensitive to the weaknesses of Darwinian theory than Darwin*
> *himself. As an example of trouble, Darwin volunteered the astounding*
> *multifaceted sophistication of the human eye." (Kelly, 1994)*

The controversy surrounding complexity theories and the sciences birthed from these

explorations might best be understood in the context of the on-going scientific arguments

over the nature of life and evolution. As Kuhn (1996) pointed out, all science is based on

the historically situated paradigms prevailing at any one time, and a new contender must

elbow its way into the fray in order to secure a place in the scientific arena. Since Darwin

penned *On the Origin of Species* over 150 years ago, natural selection slowly gained and

has since held the high ground among theorists trying to fathom the mysteries of the

origins of life on our planet. As complexity theory has given birth to Artificial Life, the

Gaia hypothesis, punctuated equilibrium, and co-evolution, to name a few, it seems

fitting to explore the context of complexity theory in light of the current gold standard of

such theories, Darwin's theory of natural selection.

As Kelly's quote at the beginning of this section shows, Darwin's theory on the origin of

species leaves a hole into which complexity theorists have moved and taken up residence.

Even in Darwin's time, his colleagues were skeptical of his theories, not because of the

challenge to current theological dogma, but because his theory didn't match the data.

Kelly (1994) puts it succinctly:

> Darwinism is wrong by what it omits and by what it incorrectly emphasizes. …
> The most stellar naturalists, geologists, and biologists of Darwin's time hesitated
> (despite Darwin's constant badgering) to accept his general theory in full when it
> was published in 1859. … because they felt Darwin's explanation did not
> accurately fit the facts of nature, facts with which they were intimately familiar in
> a way that is rare today in this era of specialization and indoor laboratories. But
> since they could offer neither compelling disproof nor an alternative theory of
> equal quality, their forceful criticisms were buried in correspondence and
> scholarly disputes. …Almost every radical evolutionary conviction circulating
> today has as its source some thinker in the years after Darwin but before
> acceptance of his theory as dogma.

The problem with Darwin's theory of natural selection is that micro-changes, even those

accumulated over thousands of generations, do not show the necessary kind of speciation

required to generate the emergence of *new* species that is the hallmark of "evolutionary"

change. Instead, field data to date show that natural selection does allow for the kind of

variation and adaptation *within* a species that one would expect from micro-changes over

time. The macro-changes of new species that appear in the fossil record are still

unexplained. Margulis (in Kelly, 1994), an outspoken biologist and co-creator with

Lovelock of the Gaia hypothesis, has an even more pithy way of summing things up:

"Natural selection is the editor, not the author."

After the successes of the developing field of biology in the nineteenth century,

especially the discovery of genes, a mechanistic view of life became the norm, pushing

aside other theories and perspectives. The tension between the mechanistic perspective

and a more holistic perspective, and between explanations based in matter (substance)

and those centered on the study of form (pattern) continues into the current debates

challenging the new complexity theories. An examination of the underlying metaphors

that have structured the two perspectives will help explain why complexity theories have

not yet found a firm place among the mainstream scientific community.

Arguments of a holistic vs. mechanical universe

Darwin's theory provides a good illustration of the tension between those who seek an

understanding of the processes of life through an examination of matter (substance) and

those whose pursuit of illumination focuses on form (pattern). For those who focus on

matter, such as Darwin, measurement, repeatability and statistics become the measure of

a good model of reality. For those who focus on form, and many complexity theorists

find themselves placed here, reality itself can be in question; process, relationship and

holism come to the fore.

This argument has been going on for a very long time in various forms. (Capra, 1996)

Lewin (1999) puts it best:

> For two millennia, an intellectual divide separated scholars' views of the natural
> world, one essentially Platonic, the other Aristotelian. On the Aristotelian side,

mechanists said that living organisms are "nothing but machines," and are completely explicable by the laws of mechanics, physics and chemistry. Platonics agreed that living organisms obeyed these physical laws, but insisted that the essence of life itself was something extra, a vital force breathed into the mere material.

By the 19th century, Plato's adherents became known as vitalists, while those influenced by Aristotle followed the mechanistic path of explanation.

This age old debate between mechanists and vitalists has assumed a modern incarnation with the complexity theories now being labeled "emergentists" because of their claims that life itself is an emergent property of matter given the right conditions. Theoretical biologist Brian Goodwin states the emergentist position this way (in Lewin, 1999):

> I'm talking about the organism as the cause and effect of itself, its own intrinsic order and organization. Natural selection isn't the *cause* of organisms. Genes don't *cause* organisms. There are no *causes* of organisms. Organisms are self-causing agencies. … if you think in terms of the emergent features of self-organization… You have to get rid of the idea that there's something added from the outside that's responsible for life. There's nothing added from the outside, it all flows from the inside from the organism itself, the biological attractor.

This sounds suspiciously like holism, and for many scientists it smacks of the old, mystical view of the much-scorned vitalism. Even though most of the scientists working in the field of complexity want to avoid any association with holism or mystical views like vitalism, even the most die-hard Artificial Life scientists sometimes fall into vitalist-sounding speech. Witness Chris Langton (in Kelly, 1994), the originator of the field of Artificial Life: "There are these other forms of life, artificial ones, that want to come into existence. And they are using me as a vehicle for its reproduction and its implementation." This sounds suspiciously teleological for a scientist.

Historian Provine (in Lewin, 1999) sums up the Aristotelian view of the complexity

theorists claims of emergence and a holistic view of natural phenomena. "The

emergentists can claim to be complete materialists and at the same time get out exactly

what the vitalists wanted most…irreducible lovely properties of evolution going higher

and higher, getting more and more complex. … Tell me what the mechanisms are that

produce these patterns, then perhaps I'll get interested." Even complexity theorists like

Stroganz (2003) agree that complexity theories often fail to reach to the heart of *how* new

complex behaviors emerge from seemingly simple systems:

> Complexity theory taught us that many simple units interacting according to
> simple rules could generate unexpected order. But where complexity theory has
> largely failed is in explaining *where* the order comes from, in a deep mathematical
> sense, and in tying the theory to real phenomena in a convincing way. For these
> reasons, it has had little impact on the thinking of most mathematicians and
> scientists.

Complexity theorists find themselves uncomfortably astraddle this divide between

mechanism and holism. Is life matter (a noun) or form (a verb)? As we shall see, even

cognition can be described as an emergent property of life.

The quote at the beginning of this section from Emeritus Distinguished Professor of

Physics and Astronomy, Edward Harrison, (2003) puts these arguments in perspective.

Since humans could first tell stories, we have been creating universes (with a lower case

"u"), from magical to mythic, from geometric to Medieval, from mechanistic to holistic;

none of these descriptions can contain the Universe (with a capital "U"). We will never

be able to get the system in view large enough to know everything. (Harrison, 2003)

Each of these descriptions was (or is) useful for the peoples that invented them. The same

is true with complexity theories. These theories take us into a domain of new metaphors

and extend our reach in being able to model, if not re-create, life's processes. It is the

metaphors underlying complexity theory that are most useful in this paper. If Hellinger's

work forecasts anything it is perhaps that the next universe will be relational.

A sampling of complexity theories: schools of thought

Two of the main schools of thought associated with complexity are the Santa Fe Institute

and the "Brussels school" of Ilya Prigogine. The Santa Fe Institute's self-stated mission is

the "pursuit of understanding the common themes that arise in natural, artificial, and

social systems. This unique scientific enterprise attempts to uncover the mechanisms that

underlie the deep simplicity present in our complex world."[6] Prigogine and his

collaborators and related theorists are engaged in the study of dissipative systems far

from equilibrium, otherwise known as Deterministic Chaos Theory. Harvey (2001) sums

up the theoretical relationship between these two schools best:

> This tendency towards the elision of the two approaches to complexity lies in the
> fact that Chaos Theory and the Complexity Theory both have a common
> ontological field of investigation: nonlinear systems and their evolutionary
> elaboration over time. They differ in that the Complexity Theory of the Santa Fe
> Institute is currently concentrating its energies on mathematically modeling the
> inner structuration or *internal subsystem* of complex systems, while Chaos Theory
> as articulated by Ilya Prigogine and the Brussels School have used models from
> statistical, non-equilibrium thermodynamics to study the *external system* of
> complex systems.

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[6] Taken from their webpage, http://www.santafe.edu. 2006. Specific access date not recorded.

The Santa Fe Institute school of complexity theories is perhaps best exemplified by John Holland's constrained generating procedures and agent based systems. In these procedures, agents following simple rules generate coherent, complex behaviors; the whole of these agents' interactions is greater than can be predicted by observing their individual interactions; and finally each of these procedures or systems can be a component in a more complex system. The Santa Fe school attempts to elucidate these simple rules in a rigorous mathematical format worthy of current science methodology. Exemplars in this school are Arthur's work on economic systems, Langton's Artificial Life, Reynold's boids, Kauffman's work on co-evolution, Barabási's networks, Reingold's smart mobs and other swarming behaviors, Wolfram's cell automata, and Stroganz' synchronizations. (Barabasi, 2002; Kauffman, 1995; Reingold, 2003; Reynolds, 2001; Stroganz, 2003; Waldrop, 1992)

Chemist Prigogine focused on the study of thermodynamic systems that were far from equilibrium systems that are closed to re-organization, but open to matter and energy, and maintain their structure through dissipation of entropy. Prigogine discovered that not only do living systems flaunt the second law of thermodynamics, that all systems will eventually reach the lowest energy state, but that these dissipative structures may even evolve into more complex systems. Contrary to an earlier "C" theory, cybernetics, Prigogine and his colleagues discovered that these dissipative structures create positive feedback loops that enable them to jump into different forms of organization. (Capra, 1996; Nicolis & Prigogine, 1989)

The Santiago theory of Maturana and Varela (Capra, 1996; Maturana, 2006; Whitaker, 2001) could be considered a third school of complexity theory. Focusing on autopoiesis, structural coupling and structural determination, Maturana and Varela mapped out a territory that brings up a new and broader definition of cognition. Autopoiesis describes a system in which a network of systems function such that in the process of taking in energy and material they not only reproduce themselves but also reproduce the entity of which they are a part. In structural coupling "[w]e speak of structural coupling whenever there is a history of recurrent congruence between two (or more) systems" (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

Capra puts it like this: "…self-organization is the spontaneous emergence of new structures and new forms of behavior in open systems far from equilibrium, characterized by internal feedback loops and described mathematically by nonlinear equations."
(Capra, 1996)

The abilities of this autopoietic entity to respond to its environment are determined by the structure that is being re-produced. The limits and constraints of this structure in turn determine what, out of the available stimuli, the entity can respond to and what the domain of possible responses will be. This "entity" is, of course, enmeshed in a web of other "entities" such that it can be difficult to say where one begins and another ends. For example, a human being could be considered an "entity"; however, without food, water and air, a person would not long maintain its given structure, so this human is structurally coupled to the local biosphere. Looking at food sources for example, a human and a bee see a different world. Human vision does not extend into the ultraviolet range, and so a

human would miss the markings on flowers that tell a bee, "This flower has food." Capra (1996) summarizes this simply by saying, "The interactions of a living system with its environment are cognitive interactions, and the process of living itself is a process of cognition." In the words of Maturana and Varela, "To live is to know." (in Capra, 1996) It is ironic to note that Maturana and Varela's studies began in the gap left by Darwin's theory of natural selection—their early studies were of the eye and vision.

Models and metaphors

> *But human imagination and human experience know that what is logical is not always what is so. To be logical is a necessary but insufficient reason to be true. (Kelly, 1994)*

If we can't ultimately know what makes the Universe tick, why bother with all this theorizing and model making? Human beings are meaning-making creatures who live socially and thus must coordinate their activities in order to create a social world with each other, to build houses, raise children, grow food, and form the complex social institutions that structure our lives. The scientific method has become the contemporary way of describing our universe. Ideally, this way of understanding our world develops in a step-by-step unfolding of insight. The real process of scientific discovery, however, is more chaotic and the clarity seen in published journals is often applied after the experiments are finished. How do we know if a theory or model is useful? In my observations, the heuristic tests applied to any model or theory that finds practical application in the "real world" such as complexity theories are aiming for, meets three criteria:

1. The model allows the user to make meaning of their experience.
2. The model allows the user to respond to the experience in a coherent manner.

3. The model allows the user to predict with a useful degree of accuracy what will happen next.

Complexity theorists may wind up relegated to the fate of previous "C" theories implied by Stroganz' quote at the beginning of this section; however, their most important contribution may be to changing the scientific method itself. Kelly (1994) puts it this way:

> Previous to the advent of ubiquitous computers, science consisted of two facets: theory and experiment. A theory would shape an experiment, then the experiment would confirm or disprove the theory. But computers have birthed a third way of doing science: by simulation. A simulation is at once both a theory and an experiment. …we are trying out a theory and also running something real and accumulating falsifiable data. It may be that the dilemma of ascertaining causality in complex systems will be bypassed by these new methods of understanding, wherein one studies the real by modeling working surrogates."

For the purpose of this article, however, the concepts proposed by complexity theory provide an interesting set of models for exploring the phenomena that arise in systemic constellation work. Whether these theories are true in any larger sense is something that is outside the scope of this paper.

Many of our scientific paradigms, including complexity theories, can be seen as a shift in the underlying metaphors that we use to describe the world to ourselves. In order to apply complexity theories to another social process, we need to understand something of the modeling and metaphor-making process. Our detailed models (universes) of the Universe are based in underlying abstractions, a transfer of meaning from a source domain of a particular, often body-based experience, to the target domain of another experience. The complex tools we create in the pursuit of understanding our world – the activity we call science – can be seen as extensions of our physical senses. For example, a scanning

electron microscope (SEM) lets us "see" what our eyes cannot take in, even though the

display on a cathode ray tube screen of the signals from radiation impinging on a sample

in the vacuum chamber deep inside the bowels of an SEM are quite different from what

we see with our unaided vision. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe metaphor as one of

the main organizing forces in conceptualizing the universes we create:

> Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is
> fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are
> not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down
> to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we
> get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual
> system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right
> in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we
> think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of
> metaphor.

Holland (1998) describes this process of meaning-mapping succinctly in three steps:

1. There is a source system with an established aura of facts and regularities. …
2. There is a target system with regularities, and perhaps facts, that are difficult
   to perceive or interpret. …
3. There is a translation from source to target that suggests a means of
   transferring inferences from the source into inferences for the target.

In daily life we often easily transfer meaning from a source domain of familiar

experience to a target domain. For example, the common metaphor of "up is good" is

easy to understand. When humans are upright, they are probably healthy; when ill,

humans are often in a prone position. So when we claim that the stock market is going up

is a good sign, the "up" is based in our experience of our own bodies. There are,

however, limitations in using natural and computational sciences as a source of

understanding of human behavior and social systems. As Holland points out, first the

source domain must have an accepted place in our world-view, with accompanying

"facts" and predictabilities. Then the target must also exhibit a similar enough structure

that we can project the source domain onto the target domain. Finally, the inferences

transferred from one domain to the other must make some inherent sense to us. In many

cases, a metaphor can be used to bridge our understanding between two very different

domains such as our experience of standing upright in a healthy position and the steady

climb of a "healthy" stock market index.

In some cases, however, a metaphor, which often has the form of X *is* (the same as or has

the same characteristics of) Y is too contrived a connection between the source and the

target to hold sway; care must be taken in extending metaphors. For example, can one

effectively apply the concept that life emerges at the edge-of-chaos (Kauffman, 1995,

Stacey 2001) to management practices? Rosenhead (1998) makes a case for meeting

three criteria before one should apply complexity sciences metaphorically to the practice

of management, and these criteria will be useful to the analysis we are pursuing here as

well. Rosenhead's requirements are:

> (a) that the natural scientific domain of complexity theory is better understood
>   than that of management;
> (b) that there are concepts in the first domain which have been clearly put in one-
>   to-one correspondence with similarly precise equivalents in the second; and
> (c) that connections (especially causal ones) between groups of concepts in the
>   first domain are implicitly preserved between their equivalents in the second.

I will leave it to other discussions to determine if these criteria fit for the application of

complexity science to management practice. Our concern here is the practice of

Hellinger's systemic constellations.

For our purposes, we will let time determine whether or not complexity theories acquire a

sufficient aura of credibility and explanatory power in the scientific community to

become a mainstream paradigm. As a potential position from which to gain another

perspective on systems, systemic practice and whether systemic constellations constitute

a systemic form of practice, complexity offers some interesting views that are a departure

from more traditional sociological perspectives. (Baert, 1998, Collins, 1994) We must,

of course, be careful when using metaphors or models, as master model builder Holland

(1998) says:

> A careful look at numbers starts with abstraction—shearing away detail….nothing
> is left of shape, or color, or mass…. Shearing away detail is the very essence of
> model building. Whatever else we require, a model *must* be simpler than the thing
> modeled.

In using complexity theory as a source domain for understanding systemic constellations

it is important to keep in mind we are seeing only a part of the whole of the work.

2. What is a system from the perspective of complexity theories?

First, let me offer a simple definition of systems from an internet site devoted to

explaining the complex theories of complexity science: USENET definition:

"A system is a group of interacting parts functioning as a whole and distinguishable from

its surroundings by recognizable boundaries." This definition focuses on the holism of

systems and the distinction or "skin" between the system and its surroundings. This

definition seems to align with the materialist school and is a common way that people

answer the question, "What is a system, what is not?"

Kelly (1994) has a more entertaining definition, one that focuses on system as process:

> Every self is an argument trying to prove its identity. The self of a thermostat system has endless internal bickering about whether to turn the furnace up or down… A system is anything that talks to itself. All living systems and organisms ultimately reduce to a bunch of regulators—chemical pathways and neurons circuits—having conversations as dumb as "I want, I want, I want; no, you can't, you can't you can't.

And another perspective, this time from a business consultant (Walby, 2003), incorporates the language of complexity theories and uses Prigogine's dissipative systems as a basic metaphor:

> Critical to these theoretical developments is the re-thinking of the concept of 'system', rejecting the old assumptions about equilibrium in favour of the analysis of dynamic processes of systems far from equilibrium, and re-specifying the relationship of a system to its environment.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define a system in terms of the complexity paradigm as a system of interrelated components that have:

• the property of being self-reproducing at all levels, although exact boundaries can be hard to ascertain. (Since air isn't reproduced by human beings, but lungs are, the "boundary" of the human being comes into clearer focus with this definition);

• components that may themselves be complex systems (nested quality or networked quality) – i.e., a subsumption design;

• non-linear (and possibly linear) relationships (and both positive and negative feedback loops);

• openness to materials and energy and are dissipative in a thermodynamic sense, thus are far from equilibrium, yet organizationally closed;

• a history; that is, the current state of the system is influenced by the chain of events that

  preceded it, and thus systems can be sensitive to initial conditions or triggering events;

• the capability of making adaptive or evolutionary responses to environmental triggers;

  that is, the system can change its structure over time.

3. What is the definition of systemic practice in this paradigm?

Since a practice is the embodied acting out of a particular set of concepts or ideas, what

would inform the systemic practitioner working out of a complexity-theory based

paradigm? What would a systemic practitioner do? In that way we would know the

practice.

My answer to this question is as follows:

**1. The systemic practitioner should examine the relationships between the
components of a system but not expect a linear, cause-effect relationship to be
explanatory, and would understand that these "relationships" may be a result of
structural coupling (to use Maturana's term,) of the system to other systems.**

For example, what appears to be an odd or peculiar behavior may only make sense in the

  context of the system's coupled relationship to its environment. Thus the systemic

  practitioner would be aware that any "system" under investigation is itself part of or

  coupled into larger systems and is itself composed of smaller systems.

2. The systemic practitioner must be aware that the system has a history and the current

  behavior (state) of the system is the result of previous states and interactions with the

  system's environment. An example of this is the story of the daughter who, upon

  setting up her own household, called her mother and asked why it was necessary to cut

off the end of the pot roast even though the whole roast fit in her pan. Whereupon the

mother explained that the roast didn't fit in the pan she had used during the years the

daughter was growing up, and so the mother had always trimmed it to fit the pan.

3. The systemic practitioner understands that a behavior that is the focus of investigation

may be a non-linear, emergent property of the interaction of the components, rather

than a property of any given component or a result of a linear cause-effect relationship.

For example, Oshry's (1999) classification of the behavior of the people enrolled as

tops, middles, and bottoms emerges from the dynamics of the Power Lab that he has

created to study organizations. One could also say that the "Orders of Love" that

Hellinger describes emerge from the interaction of family members across generations.

4. The systemic practitioner is aware that the stated goals of the system may not match its

intrinsic "structural-determined behavior" (Maturana) or capabilities (i.e., Sometimes a

system cannot perform as requested by its "drivers.") This would be like asking a

mature five foot four inch basketball player to become an NBA all-star.

5. The systemic practitioner is aware that the "observer" or consultant is embedded in the

system and cannot be separated from the system, and thus is aware that theories or

models are a reflection of the observer not the system. Basically, like the Ouroboros--

an ancient symbol of a serpent or dragon swallowing its tail-- the system circumscribes

itself.

6. The systemic practitioner understands that the result of any intervention is

unpredictable, and that a system cannot be controlled. (Maturana's treatment of

"boundaries" and closed systems – i.e., the "organization" constitutes the entity, not the

flow of material through it. For example, how do the French continue to be "French."?

What gives the city of Paris its distinctive flavor, its *je-ne-sais-quoi*?

4. How does Hellinger's work fit in this paradigm? What explanatory power does this model provide for examining Hellinger's work; what metaphors can be created?

> *...mysteries have been part of the subject since humans first began to build models. Broadly conceived to include such things as maps, games, paintings, and even metaphors, models are a quintessential human activity, and they are often mysterious. It is more than coincidence that many early modeling efforts were under the control of a priesthood.* (Holland, 1998)

I see two useful metaphors in the complexity theories that I will explore here at more length. The Orders of Love – these three simple statements about emergent properties of family systems – remind me of Reynolds (2001) work on boids, computer animations of birds that follow three simple rules of behavior which imitate the complex emergent phenomena we describe as a flock.

Boids and families

As Reynolds points out his "…basic flocking model consists of three simple steering behaviors which describe how an individual boid maneuvers based on the positions and velocities of its nearby flockmates…" The rules are very simple and reminiscent of Hellinger's three simple Orders of Love. The boids in Reynolds' computer simulation follow these three simple principles:

    1. Separation: steer to avoid crowding local flock mates.
    2. Alignment: steer towards the average heading of local flockmates.
    3. Cohesion: steer to move toward the average position of local flockmates…

The boids' neighborhood is characterized by 1) distance (measured from the center of the boid), 2) angle (measured from the boids' direction of flight.) Any flock mates beyond this local neighborhood are ignored. The point is that the boid only needs to know what other boids close by are doing. No central governor is needed to produce this type of swarming behavior. In the boids simulations the simple behaviors of individuals adhering to these rules creates complex yet orderly group behavior that appears to be guided by some governing, omniscient intelligence. How does a flock of birds alight seemingly spontaneously and in unison, or a school of fish turn away from an approaching predator as one? How does a flock of birds flow around a cluster of trees in its flight path with the effortlessness of water flowing over rocks?   The behaviors of the individual boids are non-linear, so combining them gives the resulting dynamic of the group a chaotic appearance at the level of the individual boid, yet together the flock appears to behave coherently as a whole entity. The result is complex, unpredictable, life-like behavior.

Games and consequences

In human communication, "complex clusters of reciprocal expectations in which each action does not stand alone but is a 'move' that initiates a logic of meaning and action…[initiate a] game like pattern of social interaction…" (Pearce, 1994) This hints at the simple structures that underlie the complex and varied behavior that makes up our interpersonal communication. Holland's work on constrained generating procedures and modeling is a possible source domain for building a metaphor of a rule-based world:

> …inventions like numbers…epitomize our human ability to reorganize perception through the use of abstraction and induction… To come to the concept of number,

almost all details must be dropped from multitudes of observations to arrive at essences like "two-ness," "three-ness," and so on…. It is not a long step from such an outlook to the idea that the world itself may be rule governed.

Thus our social games emerge from the essential rhythm of our "clusters of reciprocal expectations." This also explains our pain when our expectations are not reciprocated and we attempt to coordinate our actions and make coherent sense from the communication of others who are playing a different social game.

Hellinger's simple yet encompassing Orders of Love – belonging, balancing give-and-take, and respecting social order – call to mind Reverend Tutu's theology of *ubuntu.* From the ubuntu perspective, a person becomes a person through other people.

> Ubuntu refers to the person who is welcoming, who is hospitable, who is warm and generous, who is affirming of others, who does not feel threatened that others are able and good for [this person], has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing they belong in a greater whole, and know that they are diminished when another is humiliated, is diminished, is tortured, is oppressed, is treated as if they were less than who they are. What a wonderful world it can be, it will be, when we know that our destinies are locked inextricably into one another's. (Tutu, in Battle, 1997)

It is perhaps not surprising to discover that early in his adult life Hellinger spent several years running a Catholic school system in South Africa for the Zulu people.

From a constellation perspective, the families that manage to adapt to circumstances are those that have resources, emotional, physical and spiritual, and can learn to create new rules. These families exhibit a kind of "game mastery" to use Pearce's term with respect to contemporary life. Families get stuck in painful patterns when they cannot adapt, cannot learn, or lack the resources to accommodate to changing life circumstances, and get stuck in patterns of restricted responses that do not "structurally couple" well with

their environment. These families cannot accommodate to the requirements of the Orders

of Love, and get caught in the twists of conscience, often in the service of a family

"secret." As Schützenberger (1998) points out, families can become twisted by two

conflicting consciences: one that says, you are "forbidden to remember" a secret, the

other which says, no member of a family may be excluded, so you are "forbidden to

forget." The result is a kind of double bind where the problems of one generation are

innocently, and often outside of conscious awareness, taken up by the next, yet nothing is

resolved. In this way, simple game rules generate the extraordinarily complex behavior

of "dysfunctional" family systems. One could posit that the orders of love and the

descriptions of conscience are like the simple rules that govern agent-based behavior

described by Reynolds, Holland and others. However, unlike the simple agents in these

computer simulations, in this case we are free to violate the rules, in spite of the

consequences this may bring upon us.

Autopoiesis and the transmission of affect

As a second metaphoric source domain, I would like to consider the implications of

Maturana and Varela's concepts of *autopoiesis* and *structural coupling.* (Capra, 1996,

Maturana, 2006, Whitaker, 2001) While Maturana asserted that human families and

other social systems could not be autopoietic in and of themselves, through language,

humans could express their biological autopoiesis. Varela argued differently. At the heart

of his concept of autopoiesis was the concept of organizational closure. Organizational

closure refers to the amount of information a system requires in order to continue to

reproduce itself. An organizationally closed system may take in material from the

external surroundings but does not need information from outside of itself to continue its

processes of production. Sociologist, Lukmann (Viskovatoff, 1999) identifies

communication as the medium of self-reproduction for social systems. Given this

perspective, Capra's view of the family as an autopoietic system makes sense:

> A family system, for example, can be defined as a network of conversations
> exhibiting inherent circularities. The results of conversations give rise to further
> conversations, so that self-amplifying feedback loops are formed. The closure of
> the network results in a shared system of beliefs, explanations, and values—a
> context of meaning—that is continually sustained by further conversations.
>
> The communicative acts of the network of conversations include the "self-
> production" of the roles by which the various family members are defined and of
> the family system's boundary. Since all these processes take place in the symbolic
> social domain, the boundary cannot be a physical boundary. It is a boundary of
> expectations, confidentiality, loyalty and so on. Both the family roles and
> boundaries are continually maintained and renegotiated by the autopoietic
> network of conversations. (Capra, 1996)

Systemic constellations make visible this idea of the family as a self-reproducing system

of information in which various individuals enact roles in the attempt to resolve

longstanding issues in the system. Unless new information can penetrate the boundary of

the system it seems to continue to enact these patterns of "stuckness," enrolling the next

generation in the issues of the former.

As a mechanism of how these patterns continue to be produced by the family system, I

would like to draw on Maturana and Varela's theory of structural coupling as a source

domain for this metaphor. I also draw on Brennan's theory of the transmission of affect

(Brennan, 2004). (While I will not go into her theory here, I will make use of her general

argument in support of the metaphor of the family constellation as an autopoietic,

structurally coupled system.) If, as Brennan suggests, affect can be transmitted beyond

the boundaries of our skin and one person can "pick up" the affective state of another –

something that most of us have experienced in daily life, e.g., being affected by a friend's

"down" mood – then it makes sense that the children in a family would be "affected" by

the emotional information in the family system and tend, within the constraints of their

individual structure, to re-produce that affective state even though they may not be aware

of the originating events. An example of this is the "double shift" case mentioned in

Section 1 of this article. Hellinger (1998) points out that the weakest members of a

system are the most dependent on it for survival, and hence, most subject to "belonging."

That is, they will "pick up" affective content and attempt to solve the issues in their own

lives, even though they may be unaware of the situation that originally generated the

affective state in the family system, as in the case mentioned in this article, the aunt's

anger at being jilted by her lover was transmitted, possibly through the mother's response

to her sister's suicide, to the niece.

If we take as a source domain the concept of structural coupling, one could say that the

child is triggered by the parental or familial environment, and according to his or her own

structure, responds by "picking up" a part of the familial affective legacy. Until the

originating circumstances can be discovered, the child often assumes that the affect

"belongs" to him or her and that the child is the source of the affect. Systemic feelings

generated in this way are often persistent and resist individual therapy as a method of

resolution. It is almost as if the system continues pushing to resolve certain types of

problems. Typically we see in constellation work that traumas have an "afterlife" of

about three or four generations. In severe situations – a murder within the family, for example, that is subsequently "covered up" – the afterlife seems to persist for seven or more generations, enrolling a susceptible child or two (or more) from each succeeding generation. Systemic constellations allow the system to "learn" by re-introducing information about the originating experiences in the family that are behind the affective state and releasing the individual from the need to "carry" this information for the family system. This harkens back to Schüzenberger's double bind, "You are forbidden to remember; you are forbidden to forget." As part of the source domain for this paper, Capra (1996) shows how a system can continue to change yet remain the same: "The central characteristic of an autopoietic system is that it undergoes continual structural changes while preserving its weblike pattern of organization." This explains how a family can continue to pass on elements of a traumatic experience even though the original members who have experienced the family are no longer alive.

Much of this is a speculative position, of course, a metaphor built on theory that cannot be proven. However, it does provide an interesting model to explain how the trans-generational patterns that show up in the systemic constellation process are stabilized enough to be passed on from one generation to the next. Extending this metaphor based on Maturana and Varela's Santiago Theory a bit further, the "knowing field" encountered by representatives of the client's family could be a form of familial cognition that emerges as a family attempts to cope with a traumatic incident. "In the emerging theory of living systems mind is not a thing, but a process. It is cognition, the process of knowing, and is identified with the process of life itself." (Capra, 1996) Thus the phrase:

"Families have an unconscious mind that travels the generations and entangles those who follow in the fates of those who came before."[7] Through structural coupling, children adapt to the affective environment of their family system, their particular structure determining what of the affective family "stew" will trigger them.

While neither of the source domains explored in this paper would provide an invincible basis for explaining the phenomena observed in systemic constellation work – their "aura" is not widely accepted by mainstream science – they do offer an interesting perspective on phenomena we cannot yet explain in hallowed, scientific terms and may provide a jumping off point for further investigation.

Socialization and practice

How is this related to practice? My experience of learning to facilitate Hellinger's work was that I was being socialized into the rules of a particular game. It took me about a year to get beyond the "how-did-he-know-that" stage of observing as Hellinger arrived mysteriously at shockingly accurate (based on the clients' responses) observations. In practice, I learned to recognize in many different kinds of circumstances and situations the underlying "compensatory" or "balancing" forces of Hellinger's three simple Orders of Love.

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[7] I first saw this phrase in a brochure produced by Tim Hallbom, a social worker by training and a Neurolinguistic Programming trainer by trade. I do know not if he was the originator of the phrase as I have seen it in other contexts as well.

Conscience seems to function as a kind of *deontic* force in the family system, with the

Orders of Love as a description of the resulting "rules" that underlie the game of

balancing competing forces in the family system. Capra (1996) summarizes my use of

this agent-based, rule-governed metaphor nicely:

> Thus a human family can be described as a biological system, defined by certain
> blood relations, but also as a "conceptual system," defined by certain roles and
> relationships that may or may not coincide with any blood relationships among its
> members. These roles depend on social convention and may vary considerably in
> different periods of time and different cultures. …
>
> While behavior in the physical domain is governed by cause and effect, the so-
> called "laws of nature," behavior in the social domain is governed by rules
> generated in the social systems and often codified into law. The crucial difference
> is that social rules can be broken, but natural laws cannot. Human beings can
> choose whether and how to obey a social rule; molecules cannot choose whether
> or not they should interact.

Hellinger seems to be saying, yes, we humans can "choose" and our choices are not

without consequences. With his Orders of Love, Hellinger points out that the deeper

"rules" that facilitate harmony in family systems may conflict with our social rules (such

as in one Chinese family giving away their youngest child (violation of the deep natural

rules) to a sister who could not have children so that the sister could "save face" (yielding

to social rules). That child's "cousins" reported the child "never fit in" with his new

family.)[8] These conflicts between our social rules and the more elemental forces of the

underlying orders appears to cause much unhappiness, confusion and pain.

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[8] This story was told to me at a workshop by a couple of participants. Many cases of adoption
also exhibit similar problems where the child seems to sense he was adopted primarily to solve a
problem between the parents and not for himself. I recall staying in a large five star hotel in
China while a series of adoptions were taking place. Usually my husband and I could guess at a
glance which of the two parents had wanted the adoption, and which hadn't. I remember riding
up in the elevator with an ebullient new European-American mother, a befuddled looking Chinese
child and a withdrawn and despondent looking father (also of European-American ethnicity). I
believe Hellinger is saying something to the effect that social rules cannot really conceal or

5. What evidence or arguments can be made for or against the use of complexity theory as a source domain for these metaphors?

For the first metaphor source domain, the boids model and its application to constellations the same dilemma, that of being a contrived metaphor, applies to the use of this concept of simple, individual-agent-based rules that generate complex emergent behavior. I call this the GTYPE-PTYPE problem where GTYPE stands for *generalized genotype* ("any collection of low-level rules" such as the Orders of Love), and PTYPE stands for generalized phenotype ("the structure and/or behavior that results when those rules are activated in some specific environment" Waldrop, 1992). The basic thrust of this problem is: Just because Reynolds "three rules" for "boids" simulate flocking behavior does not mean he got the "correct" three rules or even that his model is correct. It means within the bounds of the boids simulation, aspects of flocking behavior are evident that are similar to living birds' behavior. Waldrop (1992) puts it this way: "…in general, it is impossible to start from a given set of GTYPE rules and predict what their PTYPE behavior will be—even in principle. This is the undecidability theory, one of the deepest results of computer science…"

Although Hellinger is describing social systems, not computer simulations, his Orders of Love are subject to the same potential errors as the "boids" simulations. Those three orders, belonging, balancing give and take, and social order, are as good a set of

eradicate our biological ties. He is asserting that at some level we know our "kith and kin" from others. How true this would be of non-Western, middle-class families that do not employ English-style kinship categorization, I cannot say. To my knowledge no work has been done in the constellation field outside of Western cultures (and I include the Chinese in that grouping.)

descriptors and predictors of human behavior as any other. However, one cannot say they

are *the* guiding forces behind successful human families. In the context of systemic

constellations they are useful. Nevertheless, Beaumont[9] and other senior practitioners

advise against using these generalizations on a prescriptive basis. They are useful in the

systemic constellation context to make meaning out of the constellation. The Orders of

Love and the function of conscience that Hellinger describes in his writing are useful in

explaining the movements that show up across generations in response to clients'

experiences of unresolved trauma in a family's history as a meaning-making device.

They do not reveal "the truth" in any absolute or objective sense.

The second metaphor which may be useful for examining Hellinger's work, Maturana

and Varela's theories of autopoiesis and structural coupling, will suffer from the same

critiques as are charged against the source theory itself. One of the primary of these

seems to be that Maturana and Varela are making a circular argument by stating that the

way to define life is in terms of its internal organization, i.e., defining life in terms of

itself. Since Maturana's theory was an attempt to define living systems from non-living

systems (Maturana, 2006), this circular argument fails to be convincing. By eliminating

the external observer from the system, they remove the idea of programming by material

(genetic coding) means as the driver for the development of living systems. Hence, the

main complaint against the theory seems to be that Maturana and Varela dismiss the

dominance of genetic coding as a result of natural selection as an explanatory mechanism

for identifying living from non-living systems. As Viskovatoff (1999) puts it:

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[9] H. Beaumont, 2001, lecture, Zist Institute, Internationale Arbitsgemeinshaft Systemische
Lösungen Nach Bert Hellinger. Training in systemic constellation work in Penzberg, Germany.

The second error is the common mistake made when discussing biological problems of confusing ultimate and proximate causation and a general disregard for evolutionary thinking. The authors argue that because the cell does not really decode the genetic information in its DNA but merely carries on chemical reactions that make up its circular organization (proximate causation), the genetic code is an observer-dependent entity and hence irrelevant to the fundamental principles of life (Maturana and Varela 1980, 90-93). But the reason the cell has DNA is that through the process of natural selection, DNA came to prevail in the earth's biosphere because it provides a very efficient mechanism for replicating life (ultimate causation) and in this role presumably is central to an understanding of life!

This seems to be another case of the old argument between materialists (matter, in this case, genetic code) and emergentists (form or process, in this case, self-reproduction of organizationally closed systems) arguments. As a spectator in this game, it seems to me that the main difference is that one argument (materialism) has had greater usefulness so far in our human history, and is thus much more elaborated than the other. In which case, the jury is still out on whether or not Maturana and Varela's theories are a good platform for explanatory metaphors for systemic constellations.

6. How does Hellinger's work qualify or not as a form of systemic practice in this paradigm?

In the field how people apply Hellinger systemic constellation work varies widely. As a trainer of the work, I am not unbiased in my preferences for how I believe the principles should be applied or how a facilitator should behave. These biases are part of how I have metabolized the workshop experiences, trainings, reading, videos, leading trainings and my own workshops over the years I have done the work, attended conferences, seen other facilitators, sponsored other practitioners, and hosted a conference. Nevertheless, I will

try to remain as neutral as possible in my attempt to point out a range of perspectives. Using the set of six guidelines I described above for question number three, let us see if systemic constellations would qualify as a systemic form of practice from a complexity theory perspective.

The first guideline is for the systemic practitioner to examine the relationships between the components of a system, but not to expect a linear cause-effect explanation of those relationships. I ask my students to think of the constellation, the client, the group and themselves as part of a larger organism that contains information about this particular client's system. As such, when they make a movement in one part of the constellation, another part of the system, quite unexpectedly, sometimes will respond. While it is possible to apply Hellinger's Orders of Love and other generalizations about family systems in a procedural manner, this approach usually does not have good results. Most facilitators I've spoken with or observed tend to have some version of the "organism" perspective, at least ideally. While it is very tempting to make pronouncements about cause and effect after a constellation has shown a clear movement along the lines of, say for example, a client's entanglement with an excluded member of the family (as in our double shift example), it is usually better to refrain. The client will often make meaning from the constellation in a way that is more in tune with her life world than the facilitator can.

In actuality, the meanings clients make from the constellation work seem to be complex and take time to unfold. The facilitator usually does not know exactly what the client will

make of the constellation from a cognitive perspective. The affective or emotional impact

for clients of

1) having their sanity validated[10] by people who do not know the family story and are

simply following body sensations that arise in the constellations, and,

2) seeing in three dimensions the enactment and sometimes resolution of family

dynamics seems to have strength that descriptive interventions lack. It appears to take

clients a while to work this experience into their narratives of self and family/other, even

though the impact may be immediately visible. (Hellinger, 1998, 2001).

One of the strengths of the systemic constellation work is that it does bring into view

other aspects of the system and provides a more encompassing picture of what the client

may be experiencing from within his individual perspective. In the cases given in this

article, additional levels of the system are added—in the organizational case, the past

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[10] As an example of confirming the client's sanity, in a recent case, a client's mother's
representative could not stop turning in circles. The movement was irresistible. I added a person
from the group to the constellation to represent the previous generation. This person felt large
and hostile and "loomed" over the mother's representative. The mother kept turning and would
not look at the new representative. The client then provided some background. The mother's
father had divorced the grandmother because of the grandmother's violence and instability. The
mother was old enough at the time of the separation to have been exposed to violence in the home
and apparently knew something she was forbidden to speak about. Based on my body sense of
the field and the representatives' behavior, I turned to the client and said, "I think your family is a
little bit crazy." This may seem like a harsh thing to say, yet the client smiled, said, "I guess that
makes me crazy, too." This client had suffered from a particularly harsh (i.e., violent) "inner
critic." During the first three days of the workshop the client was pale, tense and sad, not smiling
or joining others when there was general laughter. Shortly after the constellation was completed,
the client's face and shoulders relaxed and he seemed more at peace. As far as I could tell, he
knew his family was "a little bit crazy," and yet felt compelled to go along with the family secret.
He pretended, along with his family, that he was the one with the problem, not his family. When
the "secret" could be seen, even though we did know the details, the client relaxed. This client
continued to be relaxed, smiling and laughing during the remaining two days of the workshop.
His face looked so different that other members of the group remarked on the change. It seemed
for this client it was better to be "a little bit crazy" than continue to pretend everything was
"normal" in his family. The "inner critic" also lost some of its power once this dynamic could be
seen; the client felt much more compassion for his "crazy" mother, and for himself.

behavior of the manager is brought in, in the family cases, previous generations are

included; this shifts the dynamic of the relationships and shifts the client's perception of

his or her situation in usually useful ways. The form of the practice itself thus includes

the second guideline for systemic practice: "…awareness that the system has a history

and that the current behavior (state) of the system is the result of previous states…"

The third guideline, an understanding that the client's "issue" may be an emergent

property of the complex interactions of the system's components over time, helps the

systemic practitioner of constellation work know to look at the whole pattern of the

"organism" instead of assuming that the client's issue is "personal."

The fourth guideline, the awareness that stated goals may not match the structurally

determined behavior or capabilities of a situation, is very important in the work. Because

the client may be entangled in a systemic issue of which he or she may not have direct

knowledge, it is very important to inquire "around" the client's stated issue, i.e., to be

aware of the behavior of all elements of the system and not assume the client has a

complete description available to him or her.

For example, if a wife accuses her husband of being unavailable, it is important for the

constellation facilitator to also look at the wife's position in the system. It isn't unusual

for the wife to be at least as "unavailable" as the husband because she is entangled in a

"family of origin" dynamic (known to my students as the "F.O.O. Factor"[11]), something

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[11] F.O.O. Factor is the Family Of Origin Factor.

that both partners can sense but neither can name. Sometimes what one partner is asking

of the other is not something a partner can provide, but rather something that the partner

needed from her parents.

In the fifth guideline, the facilitator always "joins" the system with awareness that he or

she is doing so. Supervisory constellations show that the best "position" for a facilitator is

typically near the edge of the system, not so far "in" as to become part of the system, and

not so far "out" as to be disconnected from the experiences of the participants. This is a

tricky position to maintain; however, avoiding what Hellinger terms as a "therapeutic

relationship" (see Section 3) is helpful. The most useful stance for the facilitator is one

that is captured in a famous quote by Mahatma Ghandi to the effect of, "See those people

up ahead, I must catch up to them for I am their leader." A good facilitator follows what

is unfolding in the constellation process so fast it looks like he or she is leading. The

constellation/client/group will inevitably give a perceptive facilitator cues that he or she

has missed an important bifurcation point. Rather than steering the constellation, the

facilitator is "steered by" the constellation and is able to articulate to the

client/constellation/group aspects of the client's system's process. Hellinger talks about

agreeing to a client's system and the system's fate prior to working with her. This can be

quite a challenging stance in the face of "socially proscribed" situations or behaviors, for

example, a woman who "had decided to die" of cancer. (See Section 3) However, if the

facilitator cannot "agree" to what is happening in the client's system, he cannot facilitate.

This means "joining" the system in a non-judgmental way and taking an almost *Zen*

stance towards what unfolds.

Lastly, the results of the practitioner's interventions will be unpredictable. This is a very

accurate description of my experience as a facilitator. Constellations that arrive at a

satisfying resolution picture may not have as much impact for the client as those that are

stopped at a moment of great tension. The results of the constellation work are unique to

each client and each system. The best the practitioner can do is report accurately his or

her own perceptions in language that allows the client to make his or her own choices

about what unfolds in the constellation.[12]

In Summary

To summarize this section: Although the theories and models presented here provide an

interesting source domain for exploring possible explanations for a few of the phenomena

observed in the practice of systemic constellation work, much of the amazing

synchronicities and surprising coincidences that occur in the constellation setting seem to

belong to a more mysterious process than our current scientific explanations can reach. I

conclude this section with a quote from the scientist Eddington, (in Harrison, 2003):

> *We have found a strange footprint on the shores of the unknown. We have devised
> profound theories, one after another, to account for its origin. At last we have*

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[12] One of the first times I stopped a constellation was with a young couple on the verge of
divorce. I could see no way to move forward, and, shocking myself, the clients, the
representatives, and, the group, I stopped the constellation and had the representatives sit down.
During the break about twenty minutes later, the wife began to cry and the real issue tumbled into
the open. This was a several years ago. Just a few months ago they sent me a photo of their new-
born child. They had stayed together and resolved the issue. Who knew that stopping a
constellation at a painful place would the best intervention possible for this couple? I thought I'd
failed as a facilitator since no resolution seemed possible at that time. That constellation taught
me a lot, including humility!

M. Jane Peterson, PhD

succeeded in reconstructing the creature that made the footprint. And lo! It is our own…. The mind has but recovered from nature what the mind put into nature.

SECTION 3: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND HELLINGER

Alice thought she had never seen such a curious croquet-ground in her life: it was all ridges and furrows; the croquet-balls were live hedgehogs, and the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up and stand on their hands and feet, to make the arches. The chief difficulty Alice found at first was in managing her flamingo: she succeeded in getting its body tucked away … but generally, just as she had got its neck nicely straightened out, and was going to give the hedgehog a blow with its head, it would twist itself round and look up into her face, with such a puzzled expression that she could not help bursting out laughing: and when she had got its head down and was going to begin again, it was very provoking to find that the hedgehog had unrolled itself, and was in the act of crawling away…and as the doubled-up soldiers were always getting up and walking off to other parts of the ground, Alice soon came to the conclusion that it was a very difficult game indeed. Lewis Carroll from *Alice in Wonderland*.

As we come to the last section of this paper, I would like to reveal one of the difficulties I've struggled with in writing this article. My first career was as an engineer and when I entered the realm of scholar-practitioners in the human sciences, I arrived at this task accustomed to writing disembodied reports about external "objective" realities, that is, desiccated and disembodied descriptions of activities carried out in the research lab. Chemicals magically mixed themselves to create the "right" results. Measurement equipment spewed out reports that no one analyzed, but somehow conclusions always appeared in the final report. Even though I had long since left the laboratory for other work, including constellation facilitation, my first encounters with social construction were confusing. How could there not be a reality "out there" and what did these writers mean when they said our social worlds were "constructed?"

Several books, discussions and a few courses later, I'm still struggling with some of these questions though perhaps with a more refined vocabulary. The question of what "voice" with which to write this article – the "scientific" and supposedly credible voice of my

past, or the engaged voice of a participant-researcher – kept me in a whirl of discomfort

each time I sat down to write, especially this section. It took me several weeks before I

could actually accomplish the task. If my "voice" is or has been uneven in this article, I

beg the reader's patience.

I open this exploration of systemic constellation work and social constructionism with a

bow to Ernst von Glasersfeld, a true radical constructivist, and one who taught me the

difference between construct*iv*ism and construct*ion*ism (von Glasersfeld in Schnitmann

2002). von Glasersfeld's article led me to understand that the original radical

constructivists were Native Americans. As Ross (1992) reports, quoting from Dr. Clare

Brant, a Mohawk and practicing psychiatrist in a speech given to Native parents in

Ontario in 1982: "…[An] Indian will never interfere in any way with the rights,

privileges and activities of another person… To do so would be interfering with the

activities and freedom of another. This is forbidden, rude, and will not usually be done by

the Indian person." To put it another way: "As an old Ojibway man once told me, 'All I

can tell you about…is me. All the rest is guesswork.'" (Ross, 1996) Unlike

constructivists, who believe we can only know what is happening in our own skin, *social*

construc*tion*ists attempt to understand the complex inter-weavings that happen *between*

us, out of which, they claim, our social worlds arise and take form.

In this section I will explore the organizing question for this paper: "Is Hellinger's work a

systemic form of practice?" from a social constructionist perspective. I will draw on

Hellinger's own words in his writings and texts as a source for comparison in contrast to

sections one and two where I focused on aspects of the practice of systemic

constellations.

Like complexity theory, social constructionism is not a single theory. Instead it seems to

be a response on the part of scholars who research human experience and social

organization to the "world as it has been described" up until recent times. These

responses come from scholars and practitioners in many fields, anthropologists,

sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, organizational theorists, and communications

theorists, to name some of the main participants. With so many players, social

constructionism sometimes resembles a huge poker tournament in a crowded casino with

key players crammed around various tables (topics), peering through the smoke-filled

haze, accompanied by muffled voices and the clink of chips and the occasional outburst

of glee or moan of dismay. I can discern several different games going on at once--from

Texas Hold 'em to Seven Card Stud. (McManus, 2004) There seem to be as many

different perspectives as there are players. In short, it is a polyphonic (different voices

from many fields), heterglossic (speaking their own jargons and lingo) and polysemic

(making different meanings from the same set of cards), yet mostly civil melee.

I find it difficult to discuss social constructionism without referring to its primary

conversational "worthy opponent" in this poker tournament, and that is modernism, for

wherever I see a "social constructionist" playing his trump card and making his case, not

far behind is at least one reference to that other player, modernism, and sometimes more

specifically "modern science." Social constructionism seems to exist in part as a

description of reality that stands in a dialectic relationship to modernism, each defining

and constraining the other. Burr (1995), for example, positions social constructionism in

"anti" modernist terms, describing social constructionism as taking an anti-essentialism,

anti-environmentalism, anti-realism stance where language, not an "objective" scientific

measurement for example, plays a central role in the social construction of social reality.

According to many social constructionists, self, relationship and reality are all constituted

through and from our interactions with one another. Modernism, on the other hand, is

positioned as taking a "God's eye" view of reality and assuming that there exists a true,

essential, objectively verifiable reality that humans are able to perceive through scientific

approaches such as measurement and observation. In reading these many books and

articles about social constructionism, the main goal of this poker tournament seems to me

to be who gets to define what reality is (or is not), and what the consequences for our

institutions, our sense of self and the very nature of our relationships, are (or are not) if

any particular player "wins" a game. (Of course, if you are truly a social constructionist,

many players would have to be included in describing the game, each from their unique

perspective, and then the whole lot of them would have to discuss what "winning" means

and to whom, and who benefits, and finally from this might come a *bricolage* of a game

they could play together, which would, of course, *change* the game they are playing

together and hence the description and meaning of the game would need to be discussed

again, and so on...)

Out of this tournament of opinions and theories, I selected three themes that seem to be

pertinent to Hellinger's work: essentialism, language, and concepts of self, relationship

and reality. Using these as a starting point, I will explore modernism and social

constructionism in order to examine how each of these relates to systemic constellation

work (SCW). To do so I will draw on the body of literature on SCW (in English), my

own experiences with Hellinger and other authors in the field, and my own experience of

the practice. First, let me begin with a brief discussion of Modernism.

Though he was involved in the inquisition, Cardinal Bellamino, as von Glasersfeld (in

Schnitmann & Schnitmann, 2002) describes him, was "a very civilized man" and

suggested to Galileo as he garnered criticism from the Catholic Church for his

heliocentric views, that the astronomer "would be prudent, if he always spoke in the

hypothetical mode and presented his theories as theories for making calculations and

predictions, not as descriptions of God's world." It is likely the Cardinal would have the

same advice for modern science as he had for Galileo. Modernism purports to take a

"God's eye view" towards an external, objective, measurable reality. As Fox Keller (in

Schnitmann & Schnitmann, 2002) points out, the advent of classical perspective in

painting around the 1700's allowed artists to create a picture that does not "offer the

viewer a place within the depicted scene, but rather marks his own absence from it—an

absence that is the very condition of his privilege as observer." This idea of a neutral

viewer, external to the "reality" being measured and described, has become part of the

modern tradition that social construction takes aim at. Contemporary science has built on

this external observer/subject-as-object perspective, assuming that such a thing as a

"neutral observer" can exist and record accurately the "objective" properties and

behaviors of the researched "subject" under investigation.

This situation is compounded by tricks of the English language (and all languages with a verb ~~of~~ "to be.") The verb "to be" can function as a simple connecting link between a subject and predicate in a sentence, or it can stand alone as an ontological statement about the nature of some thing. Von Glasersfeld (2002) rightly points out a significant difference between these two statements: "The glass is small," and, "The glass is." In the first statement the speaker describes a relative property of the glass. It could be the glass is small in terms of his experience with glasses or perhaps the speaker wants more wine than the glass will hold. In the second statement, a "God's eye view" observer proclaims the ontological basis for this particular glass: the glass exists. As these examples show, we have become entangled in the same argument that ensnared Galileo and his Church: we have mistaken our "theories for making calculations and predictions" as truthful descriptions by a neutral and all-seeing observer of an objective, external-to-us "God's world."

This verb "to be" further snares us on the rocks of another language trap, "a fallacy of misplaced concreteness." (Gergen, 1999) Because we can say, "he has a constant feeling of sadness so he must be depressed," words like "feeling" that would otherwise connote a process come instead to denote a thing that "he" can "have" or "be." Meanwhile, a verb, "feeling", becomes nominalized into the noun, "a feeling," then carelessly tossed onto the same linguistic category as a "tree" or a "rock." Thus, something that we "made" becomes equivalent to a "found" thing like a rock or tree that exists outside of human agency, that is it becomes like something that we didn't make ourselves. Science

especially, in the centuries since Galileo was the beneficiary of Cardinal Bellamino's

suggestion, has come to believe that its maps *are* the territory.

Into this epistemological and ontological confusion, that very same science has recently

introduced myriad new ways of communicating, and this, as Pearce (in Schnitman &

Schnitman, 2002) notes, places the "new paradigm" of social constructionism in a

specific historical and cultural context. The emergence of electronically mediated

communication via email, voice-over-internet protocols, instant messaging and other

technologies is shaping our social relationships in ways that are not yet known and may

be as great a transformation in our understanding of knowledge as the change from oralcy

to literacy (Ong, 1992). These media give us "a sense of knowledge as being

depersonalized, out of context, eternal, and objective." (Pearce, in Schnitman &

Schnitman, 2002) This perception of knowledge as a found thing only adds to

modernism's pervasive grip on our conceptual models of reality.

A look into the top tables of the poker tournament wouldn't be complete without

examining our two "worthy opponent's" views on communication. Modernism's hand,

with the aces, hearts, spades and diamonds on its cards crystal clear in black and red on

white, was solidified by Shannon in his famous 1948 paper on the theory of

communication. Using the telegraph as a metaphorical starting place, he conceived a

theory of communication based on the encoding and decoding of signals carrying

information. Communication has come to mean transferring "information," the meaning

in your mind, from within your mind to another person's mind, a perspective that von

Glasersfeld (in Schnitman & Schnitman, 2002) takes umbrage with:

> Two of his points are sufficient to clear up the widespread misconception regarding the term *information*:
> 1. Meaning does not travel from the sender to the receiver—the only things that travel are signals.
> 2. Signals are signals only insofar as someone can decode them, and in order to decode them you have to know their meaning.
> "Communication, therefore, works quite well when two people send each other a telegram, and they have a previously established a code outside that communication system. They can decode the message because they already know the code.

That the transmission model of communication, as described by Shannon, cannot

describe the messy and imprecise experience most of us often have in communicating

with our fellow humans goes without saying. Somehow the "code" in our everyday

"signals" seems much more complex than a telegram, and "decoding" not as easy an

action as Shannon makes it sound. One needs only turn on the news or read CNN to

realize that there are huge gaps in our understandings of our fellow humans, and

"meaning making" is not as simple as sending coded signals containing information.

Social constructionism is less interested in whether you have an ace of spades or a queen

of diamonds in your hand, and more interested in how you and your card-playing buddies

create and continue that back room game of poker (and why there are no "wives" in the

room, for instance!) Social constructionists look "at" the process of communication

rather than "through" it to the content. Hence they are more interested in what happens

between individuals when they attempt to communicate, rather than only what signals

were exchanged.

Alas, it is well beyond the scope of this paper to do justice to the on-going investigation

into communication that engages social constructionists, and I will return to my

exploration of our three card players. We've met modernism and social constructionism.

Now I'd like to look at how these two card sharks deal with the practice of systemic

constellations. In exploring the nexus of social constructionism, modernism and

Hellinger's work, four main questions guide my exploration:

1. What are some of the theories or constructs or assertions that are commonly used in

describing social constructionism, and based on this, what explanatory power does this

model provide for examining Hellinger's work?

2. What is a "systemic form of practice" in this paradigm?

3. Given that, does Hellinger's systemic constellations constitute a systemic form of

practice?

4. How does this compare with complexity theory as a lens for examining Hellinger's

work as a systemic form of practice?

Finally, I share some reflections on how social constructionism has influenced my

practice as a facilitator of systemic constellations.

1. What are the theories or constructs that are commonly used in describing social

constructionism? What explanatory power does this model provide for examining

Hellinger's work?

I have spent much of my professional life chasing a single question: Can we humans see the human systems of which we are a part? (Oshry, 1999)

Essentialism

Essentialism refers to the modernist idea that behind the surface of phenomena is a

deeper reality that structures those phenomena, and if one could understand that deeper

reality, one could describe the "true nature" of those phenomena. "This search for truth

was often based upon the idea that there were rules or structures underlying the surface

features of the world, and there was a belief in a 'right' way of doing things which could

be discovered…" (Burr, 1995, p.12) In short, modernists believe that Oshry *can* see the

human systems of which we are a part, or at least describe the essential structure that

makes those systems function.

In recent times this search for a hidden architecture behind human behavior could be well

exemplified by Marx, Freud and Piaget, all of whom sought a hidden order that unfolded

or explained the observable surface behavior of human systems, whether through

entangled dynamics of the proletariat and capitalists, or concealed in the conflict between

the conscious and unconscious mind of an individual, or the unfolding through the

development of a human child. To this day, even after Kuhn (1996) made clear the

shifting social paradigms that form the basis for scientific theory, much of scientific

activity is engaged in the pursuit of "discovering" generalizable, underlying principles

that organize the physical phenomena that fill our world. A recent example of this from

complexity science is Reynold's "boids." (Reynolds, 2001) The claim being made is

that the behavior of a flock of birds might have a similar underlying structure as

Reynold's computer simulation, in which each "boid" follows the three simple rules of

behavior, and an emergent behavior known as "flocking" seems to result. In this

paradigm, research is an activity that reveals the "truth" about how something works (or

at least a functional description of that reality "out there.")

How do social constructionists respond to these truth claims? "Postmodernism, of which

social constructionism is an example, is a rejection of both the idea that there can be an

ultimate truth and of structuralism, the idea that the world as we see it is the result of

hidden structures." (Burr, 1995) Social constructionists, in contrast to the modernist

perspective, see social organization as something that emerges from the constant

interactions between humans during the course of their daily activities. We are born into

social institutions, including language, which are already in process, following rules and

norms that were established by others before our birth. During our lives we act into those

"games", as Wittgenstein named them, in the process re-constructing and re-creating the

institutions that we are re-acting to. In this sense we are constructing our social realities at

the same time they are constructing us. It is our coordinated (or not!) "joint-actions", to

borrow Shotter's phrase, that allow us to continue to go on together in a coherent manner

within the social worlds we are making. Thus, the smallest unit a social constructionist

can study to understand human behavior is "persons-in-conversation." (Burr, 1995)

Going back to Oshry's conundrum, social constructionists believe that we *cannot* see the

human systems we are part of *because* we are a part of them. In this framework, "reality,"

at least social reality, originates in the interchange between human beings and is therefore

historically and culturally determined by those specific persons. Any explanations of

"reality" will necessarily be congruent with the social worlds of social actors that brought

them into being.

As Harrison (2003) in his aptly titled book *Masks of the Universe* points out, our

explanations of reality have varied widely during the brief period of recorded human

history. Each of these descriptions of reality, from the world being carried on the back of

a giant turtle to quantum physics, is fitted to the cultural tools and historical topography

of a particular people in a specific time and place. In our time, Berger and Luckmann

(1966) -- building on Shutz's (1970) concepts of "stocks of knowledge" --demonstrated

that the institutions that we take for granted as part of our social landscape are created

through the course of our interactions. "Social order is a human product, or more

precisely, an on-going human production." This social order, Berger and Luckmann

argue, is created by the tendencies of human beings to economize on repeated behaviors

by developing patterns or habits. Since humans uniquely face a situation of "world-

openness" (not having a specialized environmental niche), as human beings, we must

respond differently to our environment than animals. Berger & Luckmann (1966) put it

this way:

> …human being must ongoingly externalize itself in activity. This anthropological
> necessity is grounded in man's biological equipment. The inherent instability of

the human organism makes it imperative that man himself provide a stable
environment for his conduct. … Through the process of habitualization, any
action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be
reproduced with an economy of effort.

Habitualization creates roles and sets of relations that eventually become institutionalized
and, through the magic of language; these institutions are experienced as an objective,
external reality.

In this view research is not value free, nor is it possible to conduct research with a neutral
observer who is completely disengaged from her research subject. Instead, research, like
any other institutionalizing activity, carries within it the specific historical and cultural
values that are part of the researcher's specific and limited life world. From a social
constructionist perspective, research becomes a political act. As such, researchers need to
be aware of their own history, cultural biases and values; and they must recognize that
they are collaborating with their research "subjects" in creating the activity of "research"
together. No empirical research can be separated from the observer.

How does Hellinger's systemic constellation work stand in relation to these two
paradigms, that of modernism and social constructionism? Hellinger's writings might
lead you to imagine you hear the voice of a modernist. On the one hand, he makes bold
and sweeping claims about the function of conscience in family systems, the Orders of
Love, bonding, and so on. On the other hand, to observe him in practice and to attend his
workshops is a different experience – one of observing closely what is unfolding in the
moment, with the kind of alertness that a cat shows when stalking its prey. I would like to

provide some extended quotes here and then discuss them in light of my earlier

comments.

Orders of Love, Language, History and Culture

> When we 'dis-cover' an order, the correct order—I'll say it in that provocative
> way—then the order brings about something healing or resolving in the system.
> Order is something hidden. For example, a tree grows according to an order and
> can't deviate from it. If it did, it wouldn't be a tree anymore. Humans and human
> relationship systems develop according to certain orders. The true orders of
> human life and human relationships are hidden and embedded in the phenomena
> of living. We can't always find them immediately, but it's much worse if we try
> to invent them to suit our wishes. (Hellinger, 1998)

Hellinger's language here is modernist – as if he could see human systems from the

outside and satisfy Oshry's goal. A more fine-grained reading of Hellinger's work (as

described below in *Creating dialogic space without dialog*) indicates that his writings and

talks about the Orders of Love and conscience, to name two, are the sum of his

observations and understandings from working in this way for many years, not

necessarily fixed generalizable descriptions of all human behavior. An external observer

seems implicit in his discussions of *seeing*, yet he also describes at great length how the

observer is constrained by and in relationship with that which he sees, which sounds

more like a social construct that constrains both parties:

> Seeing another person in this way is only possible when I turn toward him or her
> without ulterior motives. Seeing a person in this way creates relationship. It calls
> a specific intimacy into being that nevertheless requires profound respect for
> individual differences, and that requires maintaining a certain distance. In seeing,
> each person is unique and no norms are established that later must be overcome.
> Judging right or wrong has no place in seeing, but only serving love and the quest
> for resolution.

> Seeing another person also places me under an imperative to serve. I may imagine
> that I'm free to do whatever I want, but as soon as I *see* someone in his or her
> situation and see what he or she needs, I'm compelled to adapt myself to *be* as the
> situation demands of me. (Hellinger, 1998)

I sometimes wonder how much these reactions to his use of language are subtle

reflections of the linguistic assumptions of a native German speaker.[13] How much of the

reaction to Hellinger's statements, at least by native speakers of American English, is in

fact a subtle cultural bias (not to mention the historical residue of two world wars in

which Germany and the U.S. were bloody enemies)? He can sound very self-assured

and, being an older, German gentleman, this is often interpreted as "patriarchal." Is it?

How would the listener "know" that? Native German speakers tell me that his way of

talking is not so objectionable to German ears.

Theory vs. observation

Although some of his writing makes it clear that Hellinger shares common assumptions

about the existence of an objective, external reality, he resists the tendency to theorize

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[13] As an example of these linguistic biases, I submitted a short paper, written in American
English, co-authored with a fellow facilitator who is a native Cantonese speaker, to the German
journal on systemic constellation work, *Praxis*. The paper was returned to me. The criticism
from an American facilitator who had lived in Germany for 25 years and who co-authored
Hellinger's first English book, *Love's Hidden Symmetry,* was, as I understand it, that I used the
word "I" too much. (I was speaking of my experiences as an American doing constellation work
in China.) According to this editor, phrases like "I think" or "I felt," would be considered by
native German speakers to draw undue attention to the speaker, and that would be considered
"arrogant." I was told that third person, passive voice constructions, which sounded pompous to
my American ears, were preferred. Contrast this to the quote that opened this section, that
suggested among Canadian Native Americans at least, each person can *only* speak for him or
herself. This response to the constructions with "I" seem to speak to me more of differing world
views than of literary veracity.

about his work. He prefers instead to stay as close as possible to the actual events

occurring in the moment.

> Another difficulty arises when, after finding a solution, someone also wants to
> have a theory about it. You tend to lose the solution when you theorize about it. A
> theory is always less than the experience it attempts to explain, and it can't
> convey the wholeness of the experience. When something happens and I try to
> explain it with a theory, I wind up with only the tip of the iceberg. That's the
> reason I've slowly moved to the position of trying to avoid theory. Instead of
> working with a theory about how things are or should be, I have a large collection
> of experiences with real people, and I work hard to describe accurately different
> kinds of actual situations and to add them to my collection. That way, I'm always
> open to new experiences. I don't need to worry about seeing something that
> contradicts my theory, and I don't need to limit my interventions according to
> what my theory allows, to prove to myself that they're right or wrong. I'm free to
> see whether or not they help. If something new and unexpected happens, then I've
> got another experience for my collection. (Hellinger, 1998)

And, in an interview with his colleague and friend, Norbert Linz, in *Love's Own Truth,*

> LINZ: [inquiring about the representatives' surprising ability to represent the
> client's family even though they have never met them] Is there a kind of
> collective unconscious at work here?
> HELLINGER: I don't know. I'm very careful not to give it a name. I just see that
> the constellations offer one way of observing hidden dynamics in families. I'm
> not convinced that the constellations always reveal an objective historical truth
> about the family, but they are reliable in pointing towards constructive
> resolution." (Hellinger, 2001, p. 439)

Hellinger is very careful to avoid confusing the "maps," to borrow Korzybsky's famous

phrase, he has built with the "territory" of his actual experiences. He resists labels that

invite theorizing, such as "collective unconscious." Instead he prefers simple descriptive

terms such as the Mystery (capitalized in his writings), the Orders of Love, "the Greater

Soul," and the "knowing field." These are very difficult terms to define. Most of us who

facilitate often enough and in different cultures observe that, as a colleague of mine[14] put

it, the phenomenon of the knowing field is "robust." Even with different facilitators,

peoples, cultures, places, settings, ways of working, this amazing phenomenon of

carefully standing people in a configuration that matches the client's felt sense of his or

her system allows the representatives to "re-present" that client's system with a high

degree of accuracy. Hellinger himself seems less interested in the processes of *how* these

solutions arise through the constellations—and in that way his focus is significantly

different from social constructionists—than that such solutions do arise and the

phenomenon seems useful to the clients. Having said this, I also need to acknowledge

that another important element is present.

As mentioned in the first section of this paper, Hellinger has come to describe his way of

working as phenomenological. I think of Don Juan's comments to Carlos Casteñada in

the Mexican jungle when Don Juan was trying unsuccessfully to teach Carlos to "see" in

the way that a man of power sees. "You cannot see things you cannot explain. Try to

forget about explanations and you will start to see." (Quoted from von Forester, in

Schnitman & Schnitman, 2002) Hellinger resists theorizing and instead focuses on *seeing*

with almost the same lack of intention that Don Juan does in teaching Carlos.

By eschewing theory, Hellinger is able to remain open to the processes that are unfolding

in the moment and alert enough to "see what he doesn't believe." He does not fix his

work into any set pattern, rather the Orders of Love, conscience and other descriptions of

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[14] Iversen, L. Phone conversation in April 2006.

his own observations that serve as a starting place for meaning making in the

constellation process. The "ending" of the constellation process is open and contingent on

the specific case that is unfolding in the present moment.

Creating a dialogic space without "dialogue"

People sometimes remark on the "rounds" that Hellinger uses to guide his workshops. He

invites a brief comment from each participant at the beginning and end of each session.

Comments from participants are both personal and surprisingly honest and allow him to

gauge the level of partnership he can expect from each of them.

> There's much that can be said only in an atmosphere in which people are alert,
> critical, and respectful. When people hang on my every word, I must be very
> careful of what I say. On the other hand, when I'm certain that the participants
> will carefully check everything I say against their own inner experience and not
> just swallow it uncritically, then I can risk a lot. When the *other* is my partner in
> investigating experience, a dialog between equals can emerge. My freedom to
> take risks is a function of my trust in the other, and it brings us both great
> rewards. (Hellinger, 1998)

"Inner experience" sounds like the modernist idea that our personality and emotions are

our own private possession, and Hellinger is no doubt influenced by this way of thinking.

In my experience with him, however, he is very alert to the group energy, the reactions of

clients, and he explores the meaning made by others of his statements with alacrity. In

addition, Hellinger repeatedly has said in workshops that I have attended, in essence,

don't take my word for it; look for yourself. Yet at the same time, the bold assurance with

which he makes sometimes very harsh statements causes members of the audience or

group to react negatively. The client, however, often has quite a different reaction that

shows that Hellinger is in tune with the person sitting next to him. I remember my first

workshop with Hellinger. He was working with a woman who had cancer and was quite

ill. He sat quietly beside her for several moments without speaking or looking at her.

Finally he turned to her and quite matter-of-factly said, "You've decided to die." The

gasp from the group was audible. The woman, however, smiled serenely. In saying this,

Hellinger seemed to acknowledge this woman's "inner movement." This willingness on

Hellinger's part to report observations that we socially refrain from sharing seems to

create a safe space, in part because he is willing to say what he sees, and he also willing

to be wrong.

Relative reality (pun intended)

Notice how Hellinger uses the term "reality" in this passage:

> LINZ: Now I'm coming to something I often hear, "Where does Hellinger get the conviction that enables him to make statements as if they were apodictic truths?
> HELLINGER: I always describe reality as I see it at any given moment, and as everyone else can see when focused in the moment. For me, reality is something that shows itself in a single moment, and in that moment, shows the direction for the next step. When I've seen reality in this way, I state what I've seen with complete confidence and I check its validity by carefully observing its immediate effects. When the same thing happens in a different situation, I don't refer to the first insight as if it were a permanent truth. It's not. I look again at what is revealed in the new moment….
> LINZ: So you don't make a set of rules?
> HELLINGER: Not at all. People often remind me that I said such and such the day before yesterday, but I feel misunderstood when they do that. Implicitly, they accuse me of not being focused in the present moment, and they devalue my commitment to the reality that appears anew in each new moment. I observe afresh each time, because the truth of one moment is replaced by the truth of the next. That's why what I say is valid only for the moment. This focus on the truth of the moment is what I mean by "phenomenological psychotherapy." (Hellinger, 2001)

Although Hellinger's view of reality appears to be shaped by a modernist perspective as something external to himself to which he can take an observer's stance, he also incorporates somewhat of a social constructionist perspective by attending to what is "being made" in the moment between himself and his--what I would call--conversational partners, which may be members of the group or the client. His statement that others can also see what he does if they are collected is more questionable. Whereas phenomenology posits an essence that would be recognized by all observers, my experience is that a socialization process is required to "see" the Orders of Love clearly in the constellations. In any case, truth in this context is a relative, ephemeral truth, not an absolute, generalizable bastion of an ideal reality.

Language vs. action

We have already touched on the modernist and social constructionist perspectives on communication. In social constructionism language is seen as the medium through which our social worlds are created, some going so far as Gadamer with his famous statement that nothing exists except through language. Sapir and Whorf are famous (and mostly discredited) for the strong version of their hypothesis, that "the structure of our language determines (or at least is correlated with) the structure of our thoughts and perceptions." (Pearce, 1994) In Hellinger's view, however, talk serves to stabilize the problems in families, sometimes for generations, sealing secrets in the closet along with the family skeletons. If talk creates the problem, Hellinger seems to think that more talk will not resolve it.

> LINZ: Why do you often allow your clients only very brief descriptions of their problems? Many people find this upsetting.
> HELLINGER: The problem that a client can describe isn't really the problem at all. Because if he or she had really known what it was…
> LINZ: …it would no longer exist.
> HELLINGER: Exactly. So I assume that what someone says about a problem doesn't adequately, accurately, and completely describe the real situation. If I were to listen to all the person has to say, I would be giving him or her a chance to justify and reinforce his or her inaccurate description of the problem. So I stop the person from describing the problem and only let him or her tell me about events, for example, whether he or she is married, or whether one of his or her parents was previously married, how many siblings the person has, whether any of them died, or whether anything else crucial happened in his or her family and childhood." (Hellinger, 2001)

Words are, however, not the only form of communication. When my cat hops up in my lap, I pet it and it purrs loudly, closes its eyes and settles into my lap, is that not communication? Meaning being made (and not necessarily the same meaning for me as for my cat.) Where are the words? Systemic constellations by-pass language and go straight to the body as the medium of communication. A Movement of the Soul constellation may occur in complete silence – neither the client nor the facilitator speaking. This is somewhat rare, but does happen. Instead the constellation work seems to tap into a felt sense of relationship that has more to do with "embodied metaphor" and "image schemata" (Johnson, 1987) than language. Words are used sparingly if at all, and those that are used, often suggested by the facilitator and tested against the representatives' felt experience of the role, are few and simple.

As an example, in a case I facilitated recently, the client's issue was with his current living situation. He recently moved into an apartment with a jobless smoker. During the constellation I stood for a moment next to his representative who was facing the

representative for the existing roommate. A sentence came to my mind quite clearly;

though I did not know where it came from, it *felt* right. I offered it to the client's

representative to say to his roommate. The sentence was, "I can't save you." I could tell

instantly from my own body's reaction, the client's instant intake of breath, and the

representative's sudden stillness, that the sentence was "true" for the client in many ways

beyond the issue of the apartment. This was a brief evening introduction to the

constellation work. How did I get that sentence? I didn't know anything about the client

beyond the few sentences describing his roommate situation that he told me in our brief

interview. I met the client outside the venue as I was leaving and he told me that,

although he presented the issue as one of relatively minor import, that sentence had

landed with a great impact and was true in a larger way for his life. It's also been my

experience as a facilitator that the less I use language, i.e., fewer words and those more

carefully chosen, the deeper and more complete the experience of the client and

representatives can become. Those sentences that come with a body resonance are often

quite helpful for clients and are usually as sparse and simple as the one illustrated here,

and often the movements of the representatives are enough.

Language does play a role in a kind of circular questioning that occurs during the

constellation process. As representatives are asked to comment on their experience at

different positions during the constellation process, they automatically give feedback to

the client from the perspective of the other members of the system ("I feel drawn to my

father, but I can't stand to look at my brother," or "I feel at ease with my boss, but I don't

dare turn my back on my fellow directors.") This commenting occurs not only with

words, however; representatives may spontaneously experience deeply felt emotions that accompany their roles. Clients often report that this is a kind of feedback that often affects them at a very deep level. They frequently express gratitude to the other members of the group who "carried" the burden of difficult emotions that were part of their family system or history. [15]

Interestingly, these "burdens" are often passed down through generations in a family via language, through patterns of conversation (including *not* speaking of certain members of a family who have been excluded for some reason) that seem to stabilize one-time events into on-going processes of pain and separation. The constellation process seems to short-circuit this story telling process by three dimensionally representing the elements of the system that are connected with the original events and setting the original players in their original circumstances. This seems to take the wind out of the sails of the family story. The physical experience of the constellation seems to undermine some of the strength of the social constructionist argument that language is the main shaper of human thought and social reality. As Burr puts it, "…our experience of the world, and perhaps especially of our own internal states, is undifferentiated and intangible without the framework of language to give it structure and meaning. The way that language is structured therefore determines the way that experience and consciousness are structured." Perhaps this is the heretic in my system; however, having experienced constellation work for several years in all facets, I have come to believe that the body also deeply structures our experience of

---

[15] Science is still at it – finding explanations for our behavior in the brain. See the April-May, 2006 issue of Scientific Mind for an article on "mirror neurons" titled, "Human See, Human Do" that describes the "discovery" of mirroring set of neurons that are activated when we see others do something we have done (or can imagine doing) or experience a familiar emotion.

being human together, that the body is the first matrix of experience from which language

arises.

One final point on this topic: A single constellation session can take months, sometimes

years to unfold in a person's life. I am not sure how to explain this phenomenon in social

constructionist terms, or even, quite honestly, if it belongs in this paradigm. I believe this

is the reason that Hellinger reaches for words like "soul" and "mystery" – the experience

of constellations often takes place in the realm of the ineffable and is thus beyond the

reach of words.

Self, relationship and reality

Again looking at what Hellinger has said, we can get an idea what he thinks about these

topics. The main question here in considering whether systemic constellations could be a

form of practice in a social constructionist sense is whether Hellinger describes the "self"

as something a person has, or as something that emerges from the interactions between

people in the system.

> …life is seen in such isolated terms, as a personal belonging—something to possess and use as long as possible. But I can also look at it the other way around; that I belong to life, or to a force that brings me into life and holds me, and then lets me drop out again. This way of seeing things seems to be to be much closer to the reality. … We don't just suddenly appear out of nowhere. The life we receive through our parents is embedded in something greater. … Life is neither better nor worse, it is just what's available to me for a while. But I'm certain that the whole in which everything participates is beyond life. (Hellinger, 1999)

"Fate" & the individual self

Hellinger's concept of fate is a useful lens for examining his view of the self. He

basically does not concern himself with the individual so this topic is rare in his writing.

When he does touch on the topic, this is a typical response:

> I think there's a basic error in Western thinking. We think that individuals have
> the power to choose and shape their fates, but there are many powerful forces
> influencing us that we can't control, forces that impinge on our individual
> freedom of choice-historical forces, for example. Think about the changes in
> Eastern bloc countries. No single individual made that happen, not even
> Gorbachev. It was a powerful historical process that swept up millions of people,
> and it changed their lives regardless of whether they supported it or opposed it.
>
> What we understand to be destructive or evil is also such a force, catching people
> up and sweeping them along. Evil serves something beyond our grasp and control.
> (Hellinger, 1998)

This view challenges the Enlightenment idea that shaped much of modern thought, that

the individual was a rational actor who could make a free and therefore moral choice.

Hellinger disputes that in terms that sound somewhat social constructionist, but I believe

come from a more philosophically oriented point of view. Each person is embedded in a

matrix of relationships, not just with other members of the family (or organization) but

also with the specific cultural and historical events that shaped that system. Continuing

this quotation:

> **Queston:** But what about personal responsibility?"
>
> **Hellinger:** Are you asking psychotherapeutically or morally? When you judge
> someone to be personally responsible, you imply that the person should or could
> have done something different, and that if he or she had, things would have turned
> out better. You imply that you know what the person should have done. That's a
> morally superior stance that has no therapeutic value. If you ask the question
> therapeutically, then it's better to help people find a resolution that heals, or to put
> right what's gone wrong. If you ask the moralistic question, you focus your
> attention on the past, where there's no freedom of choice at all. The therapeutic

question focuses attention on the present, where some corrective action may still
be possible." (Hellinger, 1998)

Hellinger goes on to make a distinction between freedom of choice and consequences.

Hellinger: …Individuals are personally responsible in the sense that what they do
has consequences—perhaps more for others than for themselves—but free choice
is often very limited. You carry the systemic responsibility for the consequences
of what you do even if you didn't freely choose your actions."

Question: So you wouldn't condemn the concentration camp guards—or officers,
for that matter—who sent thousands of Jews to the gas chambers?

Hellinger: On the contrary! I do condemn them.[16] They committed terrible
crimes against humanity, and they must accept the consequences of their actions.
Nevertheless, they were entangled, caught up in something larger than they were.
Holding them responsible for their actions, and, at the same time, seeing that they
were caught up in a far greater evil, is different from morally judging them to be
evil persons—and feeling morally superior to them. You must decide whether you
are thinking morally, legally, or systemically. All deeds of great evil are done by
people who think that they're better than the others in some way—and because
those who judge them also think they themselves are better, they, too, are in
danger of doing evil."[17] (Hellinger, 1998)

Despite Hellinger's propensity for absolutist sounding statements, his work or *praxis*

seems to indicate that what we think of as a "self" – autonomous, independent and most

of all "ours," our own very personal self – is inextricably intertwined with our family,

and that even in our organizations: we are made up of our relationships. Even our soul is

not our own. Instead of "having a soul," we belong to the family soul, which in turn

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[16] It is interesting to note aspects of Hellinger's personal biography (Hellinger, 1998). He was a
member of the Catholic Youth movement in Nazi Germany and was on the list of suspected
enemies of the people, until Germany ran low on soldiers. Late in the war, at age 17, he was
drafted, saw combat and ended up in a Dutch prisoner of war camp.
[17] Consider the U.S. position in Iraq…

seems to be part of a mysterious and unknowable Greater Whole, where opposites are

reconciled and the potential exists for conflicts to be resolved.

Roles and relationships

There are two relationship contexts to explore here. One is the relationship between

people--in this case, members of a family or organization; another is the relationship

between the facilitator and the client.

Hellinger says little in a theoretical or philosophical sense about the nature of relationship

between family members. His observations are focused on the patterns he has noticed

from doing tens of thousands of constellations, and he describes these mostly through the

many, many case studies that make up most of his writing. He does not theorize about the

nature of relationship (process) but instead focuses on what is happening in each specific

case (content). Hellinger is simply not interested in the individual as a unit of research.

Instead when he does generalize, he often quickly backtracks and softens his positions.

"This example of yours shows how dangerous it is to try to make a comprehensive

general theory from a limited observation. I'm giving you my general orientations, but

don't let them get in the way of your seeing what's actually the case with the people with

whom you work." (Hellinger, 1998, p. 64)

This tension between an on-going exploration of emergent patterns in trans-generational

family dynamics and the phenomenological stance of looking at each case as its own

thing is a specific characteristic of Hellinger's approach and often misunderstood by

observers and sometimes by practitioners. It requires a delicate balance on the part of the

practitioner and a ready willingness to set aside one's ego and discard one's theory if new

information should show up.

As for the relationship between the client and the facilitator, Hellinger says: "When I

confront a person with a problem or describe it to that person, I'm in a one-up position,

but we search for resolution together as equals." (Hellinger, 1998)

In social constructionism, social realities are co-created by the social actors present in a

particular situation; power relations become part of an on-going negotiation. It would be

easy to take Hellinger as an authoritarian with his credible German voice, dramatic

pauses, and still presence. I believe this would be a mistake, however, and would

misrepresent a basic parity present between the client and the facilitator that is an

important part of this work. In a workshop I attended in 2003 in Santa Barbara,

California, Hellinger described the dangers of "therapeutic relationship." In the

traditional therapeutic relationship, Hellinger says the therapist often attempts to take the

role of the client's parents, only as a better parent (an "I know what's best for you" kind

of role). In his experience, the therapist is in last place, not first. First come the client's

parents, then the client, then, finally, in weakest place, the therapist. (From a biological

perspective, parents must exist before children can be born, hence parents have first

place). When the therapist remains humble, he or she can be honest with the client and

does not have to put on pretensions of having answers or "knowing" what is best for the

client. In my experience this creates a very clear, collaborative space between the client

and the facilitator. Hellinger often puts it this way: the best model for the facilitator client

relationship is that of a business relationship. Facilitators provide the client a service. The

facilitator will create the opportunity for the client to set up his or her constellation, assist

the representatives in expressing what they experience in the roles, and describe what the

facilitator *sees* in the constellation. More than that, a facilitator cannot promise. This is

the briefest of brief therapies—one session typically. Whether an external reality "exists"

as an objective "truth" or not, also doesn't seem to matter to Hellinger. He says what he

sees in the moment, and that is that. It is up to the client to do with his observations what

she will.

This approach to brief therapy is very different, for example, from the elaborate counter-

paradoxical schemes of the Mental Research Institute's early work where the therapeutic

team approached the family system as if it were a paradoxical puzzle that could be

unlocked if the right "key" or intervention were located. It is also different from

DeShazer's solution focused therapy where the therapeutic goal is to assist the client in

"re-authoring" a new narrative with more possibilities than the original one (Nichols,

2004).

I'd like to say one more thing on this topic of roles and relationships. In my own

experience as a facilitator, the constellation process is a co-creation between the client,

the representatives and the group. Even the setting or space can make a difference.[18] My

---

[18] I once did a workshop in a beautiful Native American church. The only space large enough for
our working circle was the open area halfway onto the raised stage and the front pews. As we
worked with this uneven landscape (half of the group seated on the stage, half in front of the
pews) I realized that several of the constellations that day had to do with split off parts of families
or countries.

experience is that everyone and every *thing* are important in the creation of whatever

unfolds. I cannot recount the number of times an amazing synchronicity has occurred

during a workshop, from four out of five clients (who have not met and do not know each

other) coming together on the same day with an issue of abortion, to the "foreign

expatriate day," to the number of times someone is chosen for a representative who just

"happens" to have a similar issue to the person they represent (this does not mean a

similar physical appearance). These events have become commonplace to most

facilitators. This seems to point to a larger organizing – what? Force? I lack a word to

describe this phenomenon – that is moving through the constellation work: the themes,

the choice of representatives, and the environment—all seem to be co-creations.

 2. What is a systemic practice in SC terms?

I found this to be a difficult question to answer. Finally I resorted to examining a number

of different "lists" that various writers suggested in their definitions of social

constructionism looking for commonalities, and in the end I came up with my own list of

what constitutes a social constructionist version of systemic practice.

Gergen (1999) seems to emphasize the following.

1. A focus on meaning-making as a reciprocal activity, especially through language and

   narrative. "…for a constructionist problems exist primarily because of the way reality is

   negotiated." (p. 117)

2. A collaborative, co-creative relationship with client rather than taking an expert

   position.

3. A focus on what happens "between" the therapist or consultant and the client. Shotter's

   "joint-action" is a good description of this third space in which the social reality takes

   shape.

4. An awareness of and sensitivity to values. There is no "value neutral" viewpoint for

   the social constructionist practitioner.

For Burr (1995), four elements seem to be key in her definition of social constructionist

   activity.

1. A critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge. "…the categories with which

   we as human beings apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions."

2. Awareness of the historical and cultural specificity of both past references and our

   current context as practitioners. "…the categories and concepts we use are historically

   and culturally specific. …all ways of understanding are historically and culturally

   relative."

3. Awareness that what we label as "knowledge" is both created and sustained by our

   social processes. "It is through daily interactions between people in the course of social

   life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated."

4. Knowledge and social action go together; put another way, knowledge is action.

   "…each construction also brings with it, or invites, a different kind of action from

   human beings." Whatever we define as "knowledge" will both create and constrain our

   choice of activities.

From Pearce (2002):

1. Co-constructive story-making: The stories that define our worlds.

2. Connoting the system: identifying the strengths of the system as a whole and working

    from strength rather than "problems."

3. Circular questioning, reflexivity: Allowing parts of the system to understand

    themselves and each other through increasing the perspectives introduced into the

    stories being created. This is based on Bateson's emphasis on making distinctions, and

    allows the practitioner to explore the relationships among all parts of the system. This

    practice invites non-linear thinking and helps minimize restrictive stories based on

    cause-effect thinking.

4. Reflecting: awareness of oneself in the system and the many different stories that can

    be told from a meta perspective (*about* the processes unfolding among system

    participants rather than by the participants.) Tom Anderson's therapeutic reflecting

    teams are a way of bringing the therapists' discussions into the room with the clients.

Pearce (2002) also lists what a systemic practice *isn't* in his list of the "seven systemic

sins." I paraphrase these below and do my best to guess (in italics) what the "positive" of

these "negatives" might be so that as a practitioner I can determine if Hellinger's work is

"sufficiently systemic" in social constructionist terms.

 A practice is not systemic:

1. When "actions hinder work with the client." Pearce gives two examples, diagnosing a client, using cause-effect thinking. Frankly I'm not clear what Pearce means by "hinders" the work with a client, though my imagination can supply plenty of possibilities. *Stay connected to the client and what his experience is.*

2. When the focus is on parts of a system instead of patterns of connections that comprise the system. Changing a component instead of looking at the organism. *Treat the system as an organism – look at the network of interconnections and relationships, not at parts.* Constellations do this extraordinarily well. It is the main focus of the practice.

3. When aspects of system are treated as found not made. For example, a "made" entity like "depression" is treated like a real thing equivalent to a tree or stone. *Treat the system as made not found.*

4. When one explains the system rather than working with it. *Be flexible with hypotheses; it's better to have an "orgy" of hypotheses than to get wedded to one explanation or hypothesis. Remember you are working* with *the system rather than describing it. (See "sin" no. 7)*

5. When one thinks one is are responsible for making changes in the client or client's system. (This one is also a systemic sin in constellation practice!) *Collaborate with the client in making changes and respect the client's integrity to handle their situation*

6. When one treats connections and/or distinctions within a system as closed. *Remember that this "system" exists within larger systems and contains smaller systems.*

7. When one forgets that he is part of the system being co-created in the moment. *Both you and the client are simultaneously acting into and being acted upon by the system. Remember reflexivity!*

In order to get a down-to-earth, "real world" view, I asked an organizational consultant

friend and Fielding colleague, Catherine Creede, if she would share her thoughts on being

a social constructionist practitioner. Her list follows.

1. "The communications perspective" remembers that "language and conversation create

   reality."

2. "Appreciative principles" remember that it's better to be "building on what already

   works."

3. "Meaning as contingent on context" and thus "all truth is situated" in cultural and

   historical contexts. Pay attention to where and when you are.

4. "Change as a reframing, meaning-making process" uses language to generate new

   narratives.

5. "Systemic consulting" as a mode of reframing conversations focuses on learning and

   making distinctions, broadening perspectives and introducing multiple points of view.

6. "Narratives as meaning-making nodes" – This includes using the client's story as a site

   of learning and understanding.

7. "Relational perspective on knowledge and 'self'" – Individuals are "persons-in-

   conversation", and "self" is constituted out of many different relational experiences.

How would I summarize these?

1. Knowledge[19] informs our experience of almost everything we encounter (for example, the specialized jargon of molecular engineering), and is culturally and historically situated. What we call knowledge is constructed out of interaction between living systems (could be humans, could be cats, could be cat-human interaction).

2. Language is a medium of reality creation and an essential medium in which relationships are created (but not the *only* medium. The body-to-body and body-to-environment is still important.) Stories can be limiting and can also be a site of creating new possibilities.

3. Process vs. content is the main vector of game mastery. Pay attention to patterns, to meta-rules (rules about the rules), and to what games are being played by which members or sub-groups in the system.

4. Use circularity or reflexivity in exploring meaning-making processes. (This is a built-in feature of constellation work simply by virtue of asking each representative how they feel or what is happening for them each time a move is made.) Introducing multiple voices and viewpoints is in itself an intervention.

5. Notice how the system is defined; remember that boundaries are arbitrary and that you are part of the system.

6. To borrow from Bill Clinton, "It's about the relationships, stupid." Shotter's "joint-action" and the unit of study as "persons-in-conversation" are both useful reminders to pay attention to what happens between people. Notice how the "individuals" involved are being constituted in the relationships that unfold.

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[19] By this I mean the kind of knowledge described by Schutz's "stocks of knowledge" and Bordieu's "habitus", which refers to tacit knowledge as created in a system and shared by a particular segment of the system population.

3. Is SCW a systemic form of practice in social constructionist terms?

Yes and no. Yes, in that it focuses on what is unfolding in the moment between the actors who are present. Yes, in that the "system" (the client and/or his issue) is seen as embedded in larger systems. Yes, in that historical and cultural context are considered important and constitutive of the situation the client is facing.

No, in that language is a less important factor in creating the constellation, although sometimes a sentence or phrase that emerges from the process can be very impactful to the client. The idea of "place" and "order" in a constellation's view of family systems has a spatial, physical, embodied reality that is beyond language.

No, in that there are some essential underlying structures—or tendencies--that seem to show up among families of various cultures and ethnicity and nationality in this way of working. There seems to be a quasi-essentialist/biological lean towards some of the philosophy behind Hellinger's statements.

4. How does this compare with complexity theory as a lens for examining Hellinger's work as a systemic form of practice?

Complexity theory, like much of modern science, postulates that there are essential

"rules" that create the complex surface behavior we observe say in a flock of birds. It

further assumes that these "rules" can be described. Even with the GTYPE vs. PTYPE

problem (knowing the GTYPE doesn't tell you what the PTYPE is and vice versa; you

don't know what a computer program will actually do until you run it), complexity

theorists often seem to walk a fine line between relating to their work as models or maps

and assuming that they have found the territory. Maturana's work, though constructivist,

comes closest among complexity theorists in approaching the social constructionist

perspective.

5. Reflections on my own practice and some musings on social constructionism.

In grappling with this concept of social construction, my question becomes, where is the

boundary between the human created social world and the physical world that "appears"

to exist outside of human agency. Pearce (in Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995) says of his theory of

"coordinated management of meaning" that "persons in conversation are treated as

material beings in a real world..." Those who set "stories" or "thinking" outside the

material world are still, it seems to us, in the pernicious clutches of Cartesian dualism or

perpetuating the prejudice that human actions are somehow less real than, for example,

rocks and trees. Why does the classic test of realism always focus on the ostensible

reality of an event such as kicking a brick or other solid object that human toes can feel?

Social constructionists would ask is the "kick," the act that moves the brick through the

air, any less "real" than the brick itself? We tend to think of "real" as being something

that persists in our sensory awareness over time, whereas transient events such as a kick

(where the brick lands can also have consequences!) also have a kind of reality. The brick

(which we think of as real) is moved in space by the kick: The kick also has a reality, as

does the interaction between the kicker and the brick. I remember my first visit to the

Sacred Valley in Peru. The landscape there had been shaped by human hands and in

relationship with humans for at least a few thousand years. I could feel in my body the

reciprocal relationship between the land and the people and see it everywhere I looked.

When I got home, my husband and I went hiking in the Columbia Gorge. Even though

Native American's had been in this land for millennia, they lived lightly there. The land

was still wild and filled with *salk'a* to use the Quechua word for undomesticated energy.

The land was completely indifferent to us two puny humans. Social constructionists

concentrate on language as the medium of relationship, and yet my experience is that

there are many media through which our relationships unfold including our relationships

with nature. Perhaps primary and underlying the linguistic is the bodily experience of

being in relationship with our environment, including other bodies. At what point do

social constructionists say, "Ah, that is a social reality being created right now," and

"Nope, that there is a physical reality." In Peru, the conversation between the land and

the people was deeply embedded in the very rocks and soil. Several of the members of a

tour of Peru in 1997 I was a part of remarked on the "sweetness" between the land and

the people. In the Columbia Gorge, the land mediates a quite different conversation with

my body. Where now is the boundary between the "brick" and the "kick"? How can you

separate the social from the physical, even for the purpose of theorizing?

There are ways that social constructionism has influenced my practice as a constellation

facilitator and I list some here.

1. I now see constellations as a "conversation" with the system, a recursive process

between the client and his or her system as embodied by the representatives. As a

facilitator, I am also a conversant within this conversation, asking the client's system by

proxy questions and responding to its (often surprising!) answers.

2. I no longer worry about finding the "truth" in the process. Now I focus on creating a

connection with the client, the kind of "I-Thou" connection between two human beings

that allows us to see and been seen, rather than the more common therapeutic analytical

perception by an expert of someone (the client) who has a problem. In this way, as

Hellinger himself says, I am in service to the client, the client's system and the larger fate

or forces of history and culture that influence this meeting of the soul vs. literal truth.

Was the client seen?

3. I'm aware that my work has become client referenced instead of facilitator referenced.

Many people who saw Bert's early work were influenced by his highly credible and

authoritative persona. They take the position of also having to arrive at authoritative

pronouncements describing "what is really happening" beneath the surface structure of

the constellation. This is not important to me. I am aware of the client at all times in the

process, even moderating the pace of the constellation to be sure that the client can

accompany the representatives and me during the process. I am watching the client's

body responses quite closely and feel like our conversation is often body-to-body rather

than a verbal conversation. Breathing shifts, skin color changes, where the client looks or

does not look, these are all part of a vivid conversation that takes place between the

"narrative" the representatives reveal through their own bodily responses to their roles.

This "conversation" also takes place in my own felt embodied responses to the whole

constellation process – client, representatives, group and my own response to the "field."

4. I think I differ from a strictly social constructionist perspective in that much of my

reference is body-based, not language-based. I don't always know what it means when

someone responds at a critical juncture in the process; I just notice *when* and how the

bodies respond. Sometimes I ask for more information; some times the process has its

own logic and wisdom and I am along for the journey like everyone else.

5. I cannot really explain this well since it is as much a felt sense as a cognitive concept.

Let me just say that I am much more aware of "coordination" as described by Pearce

(1998) than before. Very slight missed synchronies and missed timing will catch my

notice. Often these slight missteps contain a great deal of the client's narrative but are

outside of our awareness until I call attention to them or use them in the process. The

same is true for coherence; however, perhaps a little differently than Pearce means it. In

this case, I experience the coherence between myself and the client and constellation as a

sense of congruence. I am exquisitely aware of the client's congruence with himself,

congruence with his narrative during the chairwork, and congruence in his own bodily

responses during and after the constellation. I would extend this felt sense of coherence

(or lack of) to the client's relationship with the constellation system and me as the

facilitator. I am also aware of whether or not I am coherent with the system. I feel this as

a kind of bodily resonance (or lack of) and thus it seems to belong to the ineffable.

6. I now conceptualize the constellation, including the client/reps/facilitator/environment,

as an organism. I watch how the organism (including me) responds to any interventions I

or a representative or the client may make. This "organism" metaphor is also true of how

I experience the client's system. It's a little hard to describe, except to say that my focus

has shifted from the individual to the reciprocal relationships that include the client, her

system and the larger historical context that that specific system is influenced by.

I'd like to close with these quotes, the first describing a territory, a cloud of unknowing

that I wandered in during the process of writing this article. The second is a guiding

principle in this work that the academic nature of this writing has prevented me from

discussing.

"An unidentified English author of the fourteenth century, who was probably a priest,

wrote:

> But now thou askest me and sayest: "How shall I think…and what is he?" Unto
> this I cannot answer thee, except to say: "I know not." For thou hast brought me
> with thy question into that same darkness, and into that same Cloud of
> Unknowing… For of all other creatures and their works – yea, and of the works of
> God himself – may a man through grace have fullness of knowing, and well can
> he think of them; but of God himself can no man think. And therefore I would
> leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot
> think.

Like other contemplative mystics of the Middle Ages, the author discovered that thought

could not unveil the face of God: 'By love may he be gotten and holden; but by thought

neither.' God, the Cloud of Unknowing, was beyond articulation, and the source of all

articulations." (Harrison, 2003)

Of all the keys to Hellinger's work I have encountered as a practitioner, it is following

the trail of love that guides my practice. Love, sometimes twisted and tortured,

sometimes free and full, and perhaps God's own gentle breath in our lives, binds us

through both entanglement and blessing to our families.

> *The most important thing I've seen is that love is at work behind all human behavior and, however strange this may seem, behind all our psychological symptoms. This means it's essential in therapy to find the crucial point where the clients love. When you've found this point, you've found the root of the problem and the start of the path that leads to resolution. Resolution also always has to do with love.* (Hellinger, 1998)

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