

A Review of Family Constellations: A Psycho-Spiritual Therapeutic Approach to Healing

Amy Angelo

Teachers College, Columbia University

Abstract

This research explores the historical development and theoretical position of Family Constellations, also called Family Constellations Therapy or Systemic Constellations in contemporary psychology. Drawing on therapeutic and philosophical traditions including Psychodrama, Gestalt Therapy, Family Therapy, Transactional Analysis, and Philosophical Phenomenology, Family Constellations emerged as a therapeutic intervention to facilitate transgenerational, psychosomatic healing. By integrating a human-centered approach with systems thinking, Family Constellations reveals subtle, impactful dynamics embedded in an individual's family system, often rooted in past generational patterns offering a new and fuller perspective. This work examines how FC draws its conceptual foundations from epigenetics and quantum physics to contribute to its unique, interdisciplinary framework. Current empirical evidence remains preliminary, and more rigorous methodologies are necessary to establish it as an empirically validated method. Future research should prioritize methodologically rigorous study designs that investigate the intervention within real-world contexts, evaluate its effects across transgenerational populations, and systematically examine the spiritual dimensions of this therapeutic approach. This study also examines the global adoption of FC, alongside critical perspectives to offer an understanding of its benefits and limitations.

Keywords: Family Constellations, Bert Hellinger, Family Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Psychodrama, Phenomenology, Western Esotericism, Embodied cognition, Spirituality in therapy

A Review of Family Constellations: A Psycho-Spiritual Therapeutic Approach to Healing

Contemporary psychotherapy has developed sophisticated clinical frameworks for addressing psychological distress. However, many dominant approaches, particularly cognitive behavioral therapy, primarily emphasize verbal and cognitive processes, often giving less attention to embodied, relational, and transgenerational dimensions of psychological experience. Although increasing attention has been given to these dimensions within emerging therapeutic and interdisciplinary research, they remain comparatively underrepresented in both empirical investigation and clinical practice.

Family Constellations (FC), developed by Bert Hellinger, emerged in response to these perceived limitations. Through structured group processes involving bodily enactment, participants engage somatically with emotional experiences invoking family dynamics that may not readily surface through verbal dialogue alone. As described by Stanton Pritzker and Barry Duncan (2019), Hellinger's method can generate a "highly charged and embodied relational experience" that facilitates emotional catharsis (p. 486). While established psychotherapeutic frameworks have contributed significantly to understanding psychological functioning, certain aspects of transgenerational and somatic processing remain difficult to address with conventional models. Hellinger's approach brings these less accessible dynamics into view by introducing a distinctive perspective on intergenerational dynamics that emphasizes embodied representation and phenomenological observation as pathways to therapeutic insight.

This framework integrates the body with spirit, challenging perspectives that focus on working with the psyche primarily through the mind. By suggesting that personal suffering may be influenced by broader familial and historical dynamics, this approach reframes the content

and context of healing. Within this model, healing is understood as both an individual process and one that unfolds within broader, collective structures to which the psyche is inherently subject to. This emphasizes an individual's reciprocal responsibility to, and interconnectedness with, their family system.

Although Hellinger's ideas remain controversial within mainstream psychotherapy, the widespread adoption of FC across diverse cultural and clinical contexts has generated increasing interest among practitioners and scholars that cannot be ignored. Considering that participation in FC typically occurs within a short-term workshop format, it becomes particularly important to understand how the techniques employed can facilitate a powerful psychological process in such a limited timeframe. Hellinger's work warrants careful academic examination in order to assess both its theoretical contributions and its place within contemporary psychological discourse.

The aim of this literature review is to critically examine the historical development, theoretical foundations, and empirical research associated with Family Constellations. By integrating perspectives from psychotherapy, family systems theory, and interdisciplinary research, the review seeks to evaluate the conceptual framework of FC and consider its potential relevance within contemporary psychology.

This literature review introduces the life and formative experiences of Bert Hellinger and examines the historical development and global adoption of Family Constellations. It then describes the structure and experiential process of a typical constellation workshop and reviews the therapeutic influences that contributed to the development of the method, including psychodrama, Gestalt therapy, family therapy, transactional analysis, and family reconstruction approaches.

Then it explores the foundational concepts and theoretical principles underlying FC, including themes such as ancestral dynamics, systemic entanglements, and phenomenological observation. It examines central ideas within Hellinger's framework, described as the *Orders of Love*, that include belonging, balance, and hierarchical order. It addresses major professional criticisms, challenges associated with international adoption, and splinter movements that have emerged within the field. It then situates FC within broader discussions that compare it with traditions of Western esoteric thought.

Finally, this review evaluates scientific and empirical perspectives relevant to FC. It includes consideration of biological, evolutionary, and epigenetic research that may inform discussions of transgenerational processes. The section also reviews theoretical interpretations proposed by some authors, including those drawing on concepts from physics and field theory, and critically examines their relevance and limitations. A review of an existing clinical study on FC is presented, followed by recommendations for future research design improvements that may better capture the spiritual dimensions of the practice. It concludes by considering parallels between FC and forms of psychotherapy grounded in symbolic significance, drawing comparisons with the concept of Active Imagination developed by C.G. Jung.

Founder Overview

Bert Hellinger developed *Familienaufstellung*, translated as "Family Constellations", in the 1980s, drawing on a life deeply marked by historical upheaval and collective trauma. At the age of seventeen, he was conscripted into the Nazi German army and later taken prisoner of war. Following his release, he studied philosophy and theology at the University of Würzburg before entering seminary training. He served as a Roman Catholic priest and missionary. His career with

the Mariannahill Order spanned 16 years where he worked as a priest, schoolteacher, and headmaster in apartheid-era South Africa (Hellinger, Weber, Beaumont 1998 p. 327).

His work introduced him to the culture and spiritual traditions of the Zulu people, which informed and expanded his worldview. During his time in clergy leadership, his exposure to interracial, ecumenical training in group dynamics led by South Africa's Anglican Clergy were particularly important, specifically demonstrating how leaders can work from a phenomenological orientation. This approach emphasized identifying core principles within diversity by observing phenomena without bias, fear, or preconceptions, focusing solely on what emerges and on how opposing elements can be reconciled through mutual respect (Cohen, 2009). These formative experiences provided a complex cultural, political, and ethical context that influenced his professional orientation and application.

After 25 years with the religious order, he amicably departed. His reason was that his work as a priest “no longer an appropriate expression of his inner growth” (Hellinger et al. 2000, p. 328). Following his departure, Hellinger trained as a psychotherapist, studying psychoanalysis. He traveled globally to learn influential therapeutic approaches that included Virginia Satir's Family Reconstruction Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis, and early Family Therapy pioneer Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy (Cohen, 2009). Although not explicitly cited by Hellinger as one of his primary influences, Jacob L. Moreno's Psychodrama bears notable conceptual and methodological similarities that warrants consideration.

By the 1990s, Bert Hellinger had developed, practiced, and actively disseminated his innovative approach. His breakthrough book *Zweierlei Glück (Capricious Good Fortune)*, written in collaboration with German psychiatrist and family systems psychotherapist Gunthard Weber, brought his ideas to a wider public and established him as a recognizable figure in

Germany and Austria (Gymesti, 2023). His student and collaborator, Hunter Beaumont, an American psychotherapist based in Germany, later introduced Family Constellations at a workshop for senior therapists at London's Gestalt Institute, extending Hellinger's ideas to an international audience (Gymesti, 2023). Hellinger spent the final decades of his life lecturing, presenting his work internationally, and publishing books. His ideas continue to maintain a growing global interest following his death in 2019.

Global Impact of Family Constellations

Hellinger's approach has expanded into a professional field that supports an industry, with conferences and trainings held in countries including Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Hungary, the United Kingdom (Stones, 2006), South Africa, Australia, China, Mexico, (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019), Russia, the United States (Cohen, 2009), and Brazil (Franco de Sá et al., 2018). In 2018, FC was officially incorporated into Brazil's public healthcare system as a preventive measure to promote access to traditional medicine. It earned health coverage due to its alignment with the country's broader commitment to holistic care that recognizes the "multidimensional and indivisible nature of being" and its social and environmental impacts (R. Franco de Sá et al., 2018, p. 174). Popularity has surged in Mexico, particularly Oaxaca City, where at least seven FC groups meet regularly with therapists in private practice. Additionally, urban China FC has become one of the most popular therapeutic practices that emphasizes psycho-spiritual self development over the past decade (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019).

Introduction to Family Constellations in Practice

Family Constellations (FC) is directed to healing the mind, body, and spirit. It aims to alleviate both physical and psychological symptoms by asserting that there is a connection

between local physiological processes and non-local ancestral memory (Cohen, 2024). Designed to operate outside of linear time by methods connecting the past, present, and future, FC is a structured, revelatory approach to engage with non-local consciousness so as to produce a unique therapeutic act. Central to this framework is the premise that the self operates as an extension of the familial and ancestral system, often unconsciously reenacting unresolved conflicts.

FC reconciles what has been separated in family systems, encouraging individuals to take greater personal responsibility in developing self-management skills and fostering an environment where transcendent healing can occur (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019). In this way, FC combines family systems therapy, existential phenomenology, depth psychology, and indigenous ancestral devotion into an experiential group psychotherapeutic container (Cohen, 2024). Given FC's widespread popularity, sustained international growth, and unusual success, it cannot be dismissed as a marginal psychotherapeutic practice; rather, it warrants systematic investigation into its value, methodology, and impact (Gyimesi, 2022).

Family Constellations in Practice

A typical FC intervention is guided by a trained facilitator in a single 20-45 minute session, with no clinical follow-up. FC are conceptualized as interventions rather than clinical treatments, offering a structured process for observing emotional, behavioral, and somatic concerns through transpersonal, systemic, and phenomenological frameworks, with the aim of facilitating a healing movement (Cohen, 2024). Because no centralized national or international governing body oversees FC, facilitators are not required to hold clinical licensure; However, many possess professional licenses, hold academic appointments, or have earned advanced degrees (Cohen, 2024).

The FC format is a group workshop involving an active participant, called the seeker, presenting their current issues to a facilitator in front of a group. The facilitator assesses the participant's family story to determine who should be included in the constellation. When facilitating a constellation, Hellinger contained his inquiry to the facts of the events. He did not prioritize an individual's thoughts or emotions attached to these events. He was known to interrupt clients when they became too focused on describing their problems:

When people describe a problem, they want to convince you to accept their world view. Their worldview justifies their problem. That's why you have to interrupt the description of problems quickly. Once you get caught in their belief system, it's difficult to see anything outside of it, and then you can't help them find a resolution (Hellinger et al., 2000, p. 221).

To facilitate clients in finding a resolution, Hellinger emphasized resources over weaknesses and solutions over problems, employing the most minimal interventions necessary to effect change, and prioritizing what is directly observable over theoretical constructs or personal beliefs (Hellinger et al., 2000).

Building on this approach, representatives are selected by the seeker and placed at the center of the group circle to externalize internal representations, allowing dynamics to become observable. The field becomes the "problem constellation" to be worked through by the group on behalf of the individual and their family system (Thege et al., 2021). FC's group structure reflects forms of healing documented in early communal societies where "the disease, the healing method, and the healer must all be acknowledged by the social group" reinforcing the power of the group as witness (Ellenberger, 1970 p. 12). FC orients healing toward a relational experience over an isolated one. This shift allows seekers to recognize how the collective dynamics of family systems have shaped their origins, impacting their development.

Throughout the constellation, the facilitator opens up a field of perception using tools such as active listening and structured healing sentences (e.g. “I take you as my mother” (Hellinger et al., 2000 p. 142) and “Sooner or later, I will lose you” (Hellinger et al., 2000 p. 75) to initiate acknowledgement and restore balance to unfolding group dynamics. Representatives are invited to articulate their perceptions, emotions, and experiences while attuning to their roles and representations. As the process progresses, representatives may be repositioned or adjusted to form a new configuration that generates a “solution constellation” (Thege et al., 2021).

A constellation completes when the sources of suffering are uncovered, processed, or restored and all representatives feel at ease. Often, the seeker will enter the constellation at the end with their representative and take in a new image of their family system (Ulsamer, 2020). Through this process, participants gain valuable insight into how their inner conflicts influence their experience within the family system. Externalization and emotional processing offer participants an experience of catharsis that reframes their suffering to a system that precedes them. Following founder Bert Hellinger’s advice, once the work is complete, facilitators encourage participants not to analyze the session in order to allow the content and material to work on the soul.

Foundations of Therapeutic Influence

The development of FC was informed by several psychotherapeutic approaches, including Jacob L. Moreno’s Psychodrama, Virginia Satir’s Family Reconstruction Therapy, Eric Berne’s Transactional Analysis, Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy’s Family Therapy, and Gestalt Therapy. Examining these systems, both in terms of their direct and indirect influence on Hellinger’s training, provides critical insight into the theoretical foundations and methodological framework that situate FC within the broader landscape of psychotherapy.

Psychodrama

Jacob Moreno developed Psychodrama, a humanistic psychotherapeutic treatment with roots in theater, psychology and sociometry in the 1940s. As the founder of sociometry, Moreno (1941) explored the science of group organization to establish a qualitative measure for mapping and analyzing interpersonal relationships. As a psychiatrist and leading social scientist, Moreno was widely credited with introducing the concept of group therapy to the American Psychiatric Association in 1932, a contribution that preceded his development of psychodrama.

In Morenean psychodrama, individual therapy takes place in a group format where the patient, called the protagonist, becomes an actor on a stage before an audience of other patients (Moreno, 1948). Talk therapy is replaced with action therapy; The main intent of psychodrama works to establish or reestablish *tele*, the emotional connection and rapport between people or different inner roles and figures. Tele can take place within a person, between different parts of a person's psyche or internal roles (Moreno, 1941). The therapeutic posture of psychodrama focuses on relationships and roles that the protagonist takes on throughout their life. Morenean methods ignite creativity and spontaneity to inspire new responses to old situations (Lim et al., 2021).

Three distinct phases comprise psychodrama sessions including warm up, action and sharing. A host of 11 core techniques are at the disposal of a psychodrama therapist, which include soliloquy, double, mirror, role reversal, resistance interpolation, sculpture, social atom, intermediate objects, games, sociometry, and role training (Cruz et al., 2018). The focus of any technique is to assist the protagonist in dramatizing conflicts that need resolution, allowing for the ego to mediate the expression and reception of the therapeutic material being worked out on

the group stage. The power of this therapy moves beyond the individual, expanding out to impact the audience who is facing a mirror seeing themselves (Moreno, 1948).

The work of psychodrama generates what Moreno calls surplus reality: a version of reality where the externalization of an individual's subjective reality unfolds (Lim et al., 2021). Surplus reality moves beyond the mundane, encapsulating a new and extensive dimension without limits where a person is liberated from the confines of the real world (Moreno, 1948). Moreno observed that as protagonists worked through purely subjective material, they went beyond intuition and fantasy, mirroring a trance experience (Moreno et al., 2013). In this place, the time–space continuum operates beyond humanity's measure of time, opening into a cosmic dimension of reality. By naming it, Moreno affirms the significance of this place, or state of mind, accessed in the therapeutic process beyond the material limits of conscious awareness. Although Moreno himself wrote relatively little on the subject, his wife and collaborator Zerka Moreno, along with psychodrama leaders Leif Dag Blomkvist and Thomas Rützel, explored the mysterious role of its transformative potency:

Surplus reality can be defined as an intersection between different realities, known and unknown, where the ego's ability to control and distinguish ceases. This state determines ecstasy, which we understand from its etymological root to be 'leaving the limits of one's individuality'. This is a state in which one does not experience things as one used to, but looks upon them from another unfamiliar perspective. This perspective can either belong to an unknown part of the self, to another person, known or unknown, or to an impersonal force (Moreno, Blomkvist & Rützel, 2013, p. 23)

Moreno called psychodrama the theater of encounter and confrontation, suggesting that the work confronts forces within and beyond us (Moreno et al., 2013). Typical therapeutic exchange limits the psyche within the mind originating within the body. Moreno's theories take a sociometric dimension to the psyche positing that the psyche appears outside the body,

interwoven into social and cultural norms outside the self (Moreno et al., 2013). This approach touches on a collective dimension of therapy, where the work of the individual is the work of the group.

While Hellinger did not explicitly cite psychodrama as a primary influence, current scholarship explores how family sculpture and Gestalt therapy specifically incorporated psychodrama practices into their therapeutic approaches (Cruz et al., 2018). As a result, practitioners of Family Sculpture, Gestalt Therapy, Family Constellations, and related modalities remain unaware of the technical roots of the Morenean methods they employ, having absorbed and appropriated them through an alternative theoretical framework leaving practitioners uninformed of the technical origins and of their work (Cruz et al. 2018).

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy

Founding pioneer of family therapy, Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, integrated individual psychological, interpersonal, existential, systemic, and intergenerational perspectives into practice in the 1950s through the 1960s. While Freud emphasized an individualistic model of psychoanalysis, Boszormenyi-Nagy critiqued Freud's understanding of "man as a closed system" arguing that it carried adverse social implications by promoting the personal unconscious over relational accountability (p. 60, 2013). In contrast, Boszormenyi-Nagy expanded the focus of therapeutic work beyond the individual, situating personal development within a relational system shaped by loyalty, obligation, dialogue, and repair across generations (2013). This systemic orientation emphasizes the social and ethical dimensions of development, centering intergenerational relationships as vital to psychological wellbeing.

In his seminal work *Invisible Loyalties*, Boszormenyi-Nagy argues that the underlying dynamic of loyalty is justice, which is the supreme value that binds families together. By

examining the regulatory force of justice within family systems, he sought to understand the social arrangements that govern obligation and reciprocity. When familial “ledgers” of justice become overburdened with guilt and exploitation, the consequences reverberate across generations (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 2013). In this context, retribution perpetuates cycles of systemic inequity rather than restoring balance. The impact of this can be powerful, subjecting an individual to hidden forces far greater than the self. Boszormenyi-Nagy explains:

The individual can be “caught” in existential guilt through the actions of others as one inherits a place in the multigenerational network of obligations and becomes accountable to the chain of past obligations, traditions, etc. One may not readily be aware of the long-range quid pro quo moves, only of short term obligations and repayments. The less he is aware of the invisible obligations accumulated in the past, for instance, by his parents, the more he will be at the mercy of these invisible forces. (p. 68, 2013).

These invisible forces, rooted in the unconscious, extend far beyond the family of origin. As the individual navigates the filial scales of justice, unspoken yet deeply felt tensions and expectations emerge, subtly shaping an individual’s actions, emotions, and perceptions.

In ancient cultures seeking to establish social order, divine justice functioned as an invisible law of the universe, believed to extend beyond life into the afterlife (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 2013). By locating judgment in a transcendent authority, divine justice replaced immediate human retaliation and made it possible for wrongdoing to be endured without instant retribution. However, this postponement of justice often carried a significant emotional cost for those who bore prolonged suffering, particularly in cases of emotional distress or traumatic abuse. In the wake of the shift from divine to individual authority, Boszormenyi-Nagy asks an important question: “What has taken the role of divine retribution in the minds of modern man?” (p. 75, 2013) This drama that plays out in the family system and seeks accountability from obligation, debt, injustice, and exploitation to restore order. Against this backdrop, Boszormenyi-Nagy conceptualizes justice as a multipersonal homeostatic

principle, with equitable reciprocity as its ideal and necessary goal (2013). His therapeutic approach invites clinicians to reconstruct a three-generational balancing of relational accounts, guided by an exploration of the motivations underlying hidden inequities. By clarifying patterns of giving and receiving within human relationships, therapy brings invisible loyalties into awareness, creating the conditions for systemic repair and intergenerational healing.

Gestalt Therapy

The German word *Gestalt* translates to a “meaningful whole”, which alludes to the concept of the human psyche’s natural tendency to search for the whole forms instead of isolated parts (Shostrom & Psychological and Educational Films, 2021). Gestalt theory is a natural science psychology that formed after WWI, taking form in Berlin in the 1920s by a group of young psychologists (Walsh et al., 2014). Rooted in the study of perception and existentialism, Gestalt theory examines the organizing principles and cognitive dynamics that shape experience, emphasizing how the mind integrates elements into meaningful forms (Walsh et al., 2014).

Gestalt therapy grounds treatment in the human propensity for meaning-making, honoring the richness of experience as both shared and uniquely individual (Walsh et al., 2014). From a Gestalt perspective, behavior arises from the mind’s active engagement in perceiving, selecting, interpreting, and organizing situations into coherent wholes. Individuals act based on these interpretations. Because the human mind is constantly seeking meaning, behavior is always a response to one’s interpreted understanding of a situation (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015).

The client-therapist relationship adopts a non-hierarchical stance, fostering exploration of personal narratives where the client’s capacity to construct, revise, discard, and recreate coherent understandings and patterns of behavior becomes both the focus and the foundation of therapeutic inquiry (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). This client-therapist exchange emphasizes

observation over analysis of phenomena while remaining fully present as a partner in cultivating a deeper relational capacity (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). Through dialogue, the therapist challenges the client's patterns of behavior and experience in order to restore healthy processing. By offering insightful reflections based on observations, the therapist enables the client to recognize solutions by comprehending the nature of the unresolved problem (Walsh et al., 2014). This process fosters insightful learning that encourages expansive thinking, countering rigid, rule-bound mindsets. By opening new pathways for creative problem-solving, progress is demonstrated with fresh attitudes and emotional perspectives (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015).

Grounded in nature, Gestalt therapy situates clients in their own being in the present moment, where true change can take place. Through unique attention to the body and techniques that foster bodily awareness, this approach encourages clients to slow down and feel within. In this way, clients attend to affects that arise, naming sensations. This process encourages deeper awareness of somatic experiencing to invite a more flexible, effective response.

Transactional Analysis

Eric Berne's theory Transactional Analysis (TA) developed in the 1950s and is a comprehensive system of individual and group therapy that examines transactions between people based on three ego states: exteropsychic (parent), neopsychic (adult), and archaeopsychic (child) within the personality structure (Berne, 1996). According to Berne, parent states replicate emotional attitudes, physiological responses, and social behavior of parental figures (1996). Adult states encompass objective data processing and self-orientation to the outside realities, including the psychological reality of others. The child state embodies remnants of early ego development that tend to be fixed, which are activated and expressed in response to present situations (Berne, 1996).

According to Berne's theory, each ego state has its own complete structure, systematic worldview, and unified will (1996). They are experienced through what Berne (1996) describes as "phenomenological social realities" depicting what actually happens in social dynamics within any given moment (p. 155). The therapeutic stance requires setting aside conceptual thinking, literal interpretations, and preconceptions of the child, parent, and adult ego states, and instead experiencing their phenomenological reality as they arise through introspection, thereby validating how these experiences are active within the personality (Berne, 1996).

Ego states comprise coherent systems of feelings and responses to stimuli, which influence behavioral patterns. By understanding how each ego state functions within an individual's psyche, Berne (1996) identifies distinct patterns of communication: direct transactions and complex transactions. The most adaptive are complementary transactions, in which communication remains effective because responses arise from the ego state to which the stimulus was directed (e.g., stimulus: Adult → response: Adult). Crossed transactions occur when the response originates from an unexpected ego state, disrupting communication and often leading to misunderstanding or conflict (e.g., stimulus: Adult → response: Child). Finally, ulterior transactions involve more complex interactions operating simultaneously on two levels. In these exchanges, communication masks deeper, often unconscious psychological motives beneath a superficial social layer (e.g., a stimulus may appear to be Adult → Adult but is actually Parent → Child, thereby influencing the response) (Berne, 1996).

Games and life scripts are two central components of TA. Games are repetitive, unconscious sequences of ulterior transactions that progress toward a predictable, typically negative outcome, often referred to as a payoff. The games are short episodes embedded within the broader narrative of a person's life script. Life scripts are unconscious plans formed during

early childhood, which guide behavior throughout life (Berne, 1996). Life scripts are derivative, meaning that patterns established in childhood unconsciously inform and adapt to real-time situations. Like theatrical dramas, it unfolds in recurring patterns, shaping how individuals enact their lives across different contexts.

The goal of TA is to help individuals and groups develop social autonomy, enabling them to navigate relationships according to their own values and judgments rather than being driven by unconscious, compulsive patterns of exploitation. Berne's therapeutic approach focuses on increasing awareness of time and energy exerted in games and payoffs that contributes to systems of how individuals exploit others or are being exploited themselves. By examining how these patterns influence one's social position, individuals are given the opportunity to update life scripts from childhood in response to current circumstances in more practical and constructive ways. TA reduces cognitive distortions and cultivates greater authenticity in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, both individually and within group dynamics.

Family Reconstruction Therapy

Virginia Satir was an influential American social worker and early pioneer of family therapy. She created a therapy known as the Family Reconstruction Therapy in the 1950s working through the 1980s. Her approach blended psychodrama, gestalt, sculpting, altered states of consciousness, and fantasy contained within family systems theory where she emphasized nurturing love (Nerin, 2011). One of the core techniques in her approach was Family Sculpture, designed to examine present challenges by exploring an individual's upbringing, which she considered the root of personal difficulties.

Family sculpture engages an entire social-familial system of an individual, typically extending back at least three generations. (Nerin, 2011). Group work takes place with 10-20

participants led by a trained guide. The goal of the therapy is for an individual, called an explorer, to form an action sociogram with individuals representing their own family system. Representatives are assigned roles and the explorer addresses them directly, sharing personal recollections about the individuals they represent, including birth date and place, birth order within the family, parents' identities, family background, and significant life milestones such as spouse, children, occupation, and reputation (Nerin, 2011). The explorer elects an alter ego to represent themselves, while other representatives enact members from the family of origin.

Key family events and milestones are depicted in front of the group, with each representative's placement and posture forming a scene that reveals relational patterns including emotional distance, power dynamics, and familial positions (Nerin, 2011). Throughout the process, representatives report their thoughts and feelings that arise. Through this action-oriented technique, the explorer experiences their family system as an outsider, gaining a new perspective.

Satir saw reality as a systematic whole, delicately reenacted through family dynamics. The ultimate goal of the work is full acceptance of one's roots (Nerin, 2011). The technique can structurally change an explorer's emotional capacity, deepening it with a new perspective. By uncovering unresolved grief, suppressed rage, or invisible sadness that may be present within the family, it invites closure that might not have been consciously recognized as necessary. Satir attributes the capacity for such profound psychological experiences to the enactment of past family scenes, which evoke visceral, sensory responses and provide an experiential depth that traditional talk therapy cannot penetrate (Nerin, 2011). Family Sculpture offers the explorer abundant opportunities to gain new insights, transform their understanding, and foster behaviors that enhance self-esteem and promote personal fulfillment (Nerin, 2011).

Foundational Principles and Theories of Family Constellations

Hellinger's theories introduce key concepts that form the foundation of his distinctive framework, including the reverence for ancestors, and the potential negative impacts of entanglements with them. His phenomenological approach grounded in this theoretical construct is explored in more detail below.

Ancestors

Through exposure to Zulu traditions, Hellinger developed a unique awareness of how indigenous spiritual practices recognize the vital role of ancestor worship in fostering peace and harmony. Depth psychology in the 20th century investigated the impact of ancestors over our lives. In *The Psychological Foundations of Belief in Spirits*, C.G. Jung (1920) explores the development and profound psychological impact of ancestor worship, which extends beyond a single generation:

We can understand why the primitive attaches special importance to the spirits of dead relatives. This accounts for the wide incidence of ancestor worship, which is primarily a protection against the malice of the dead... The psychological after-effects of the parents are so powerful that many cultures have developed a whole system of ancestor worship to propitiate them. (p. 304)

Hellinger's connection to the language and cultural practices of the Zulu tribe granted him exposure to Ngundi beliefs and rituals, shaping his understanding of ancestral influences. The Zulu population's ancestors, known as *Amadlozi*, are deeply revered by their people. These ancestral spirits are fully integrated as powerful, life-giving forces that provide spiritual protection. Believed to be the souls of departed ancestors who continue to guide, protect, and influence their descendants, *Amadlozi* played an essential role in shaping the psycho-spiritual worldview of Zulu tribe members (Blackwell, 2020).

Zulu people honor their ancestors through sacred ceremonies that involve ritual sacrifices and bone divination. In bone casting ceremonies, bones from sacrificial animals are cast, and their placements are carefully interpreted to reveal divination messages and spiritual guidance. This ancient practice of symbolic representation may have served as an early inspiration for constellation work, connecting the physical act of interpretation of a field with psycho-spiritual insights (Blackwell, 2020).

The Zulu believed there is no way to live a healthy life without honoring their ancestors. Jung (1920) recalls the psychological impact of ancestral death writing:

When a person dies the feelings and emotions that bound his relatives to him lose their application to reality and sink into the unconscious where they activate a collective content that has a deleterious effect on consciousness. (p. 315).

Jung highlights the profound collective dimension of grief, which surfaces in the human psyche following familial loss. As a religious leader, Hellinger would have been intimately engaged with the invisible dynamics of the spiritual world that Jung recalls while working with the Zulu people of the Nguni. Zulu rituals bridge the realms of the living with the dead, maintaining a spiritual connection through ceremonies designed to mediate messages, restore harmony, and provide protection. These practices remained deeply rooted Zulu cultural customs when Hellinger arrived as a religious leader.

It seems that both Jung and Hellinger understood that when our living connection to the spirit world through our ancestors has died, something within us has died. In the wake of this death, a psychic conflict may erupt. Jung describes this as a “persistent attachment to the dead” that “makes life seem less worth living and may even be the cause of some psychic illnesses” (Jung, 1920, p. 316). Hellinger defines this attachment as an entanglement that requires recognition and ritual release for order to be restored.

Entanglements

Hellinger's approach posits that people experience entanglements when he or she unconsciously takes over the fate of an earlier member of the family and lives it out. Family constellation therapist Mark Wolyn (2016) explains that this process is characterized by "unconsciously carrying the feelings, symptoms, behaviors or hardships of an earlier member of your family system as if it were your own" (p. 46). Psychologists explain this phenomenon using the concepts of projection and transference, whereas FC facilitators describe it as a mysterious, unexplainable, or even parapsychological process. Furthermore, Transactional psychotherapist Enid Welford reports her observations from the field:

A person can represent and speak as if she or he were another person she or he does not know. Although I have no explanation for how this happens, clients repeatedly affirm the accuracy and sensitivity of such representations. The representative does not experience being in a role but rather that he or she is in the service of what the represented person wishes to say, prompted by gut feelings and bodily experiences that are not his or her own. (Gyimesi, 2022, p. 756)

Hellinger proposes that the intense feelings that arise during representation belong to the person feeling them, but the feeling itself is connected to an entangled ancestor, and represents something similar to what that ancestor may have felt (Hellinger et al., 2000). The FC process evokes feelings that move through the system via representative action. Through this representative perception, embodied systemic entanglements can emerge. The process invites a balance between embodiment and observation, enabling participants to discover hidden dynamics and engage in a deeper level of self-witnessing.

Defined as a social technology, FC facilitates a radical shift in perspective of self from "I" to "we", thus inviting individuals to adopt a third-person perspective of themselves, their families, and their inherited cultural groups (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019). This work reorients the

way that individuals participate in collective systems; Its impact has the capacity to reverberate beyond the self to “produce the kinds of shifts in participants’ perspectives (on themselves and others who they witness) that motivate people to change the way they “do personhood”, and thus the way they “do culture” wherever it is practiced.” (Pritzker & Duncan., 2019, p. 490).

Phenomenological Therapeutic Posture

Founded by German Philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Phenomenology is defined as the study of the structures of experience and consciousness. Combining psychology and logic, Husserl asserts that to understand consciousness we must understand how we subjectively experience reality and the objective meanings of those experiences (Smith, 2013). In this way, FC takes a phenomenological posture and attempts to merge this philosophy into a therapeutic process. In fact, Hellinger himself referred to his work as “applied philosophy” rather than therapy where he examined the structures of consciousness as they present themselves suspending critical analyses. He characterizes his process as follows:

For me it means subjecting myself to larger contexts and connections, without needing to understand them. I accept them without any intention of helping or proving anything...I face everything, exactly the way it is. In a constellation I look at everyone, including those who aren't present. I keep them all in view, and then, exposed to this picture, I get a flash of what lies behind the phenomenon. (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999, p. 22)

When working with Family Constellations, Hellinger’s focus extends beyond the specific details of the client’s reported pain, moving past the seeker’s conscious awareness into unknown, unarticulated territory.

This orientation contrasts with many conventional therapeutic approaches, which seek to explain clients’ subjective experiences through causal frameworks derived from consciously articulated material. Psychoanalytic traditions, in particular, develop theoretical models grounded in clinical observation to account for how unconscious processes shape emotions, cognition, and

behavior. Hellinger, himself trained in psychoanalysis, cautioned that once a psychoanalytic construct (e.g., the Oedipus complex) is invoked to define a relational dynamic, the phenomenological stance is compromised. In his view, the imposition of psychodynamic theory in FC constrains perception, reinforcing interpretation within an established conceptual framework over openness to observation, which is essential to his phenomenological method (Hellinger et al., 2000).

Traditional therapy operates from a place of established protocols, evidence-based frameworks, and treatment plans, while FC requires understanding of FC structures that can be explained, understood, paired with a willingness to navigate the unknown. FC reinforces openness to lived experience and seeing *what is*, exploring emergent dynamics as they arise. Facilitation requires the facilitator to “have the courage to listen to your inner voice, even if it leads you into unknown territory with no signposts and surprising discoveries (Ulsamer, 2020, p. 8).

This, of course, can create challenges in therapeutic interventions that require careful consideration. For example, FC does not always work with concrete facts, because it looks at what can be seen. Facilitators then engage with the energies of a family or ancestral system to inform the work. Assumptions can be drawn from observable dynamics that can easily lead to confusion. While constellations reveal truths to participants, the truths do not necessarily correspond with verifiable facts. While instances of previously unknown information within a family may emerge, and be unexplainably true, simply experiencing the clarity of feelings within a constellation is sufficient. The primary significance of constellation work lies in bringing individuals into contact with the deeper, often hidden forces at work within their family system, which must be recognized and embodied to facilitate resolution (Ulsamer, 2020).

Conceptual Foundations

FC insights emerge from the foundational concepts of his theoretical framework, developed and refined over time through observation. Hellinger (2000 p. 5) outlines the three guiding principles for facilitating Family Constellations explored in his early work *Love's Hidden Symmetry*:

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 safety of social convention and predictability, that is for *order*"

In developing his theory, Hellinger argues that these basic needs are universally experienced with an urgency that provokes instinctual reactions, positioning individuals as subject to forces beyond their control, limiting personal agency. Tensions arise as intimate relationships negotiate these needs to restore balance.

Later in his career, these three core principles rebranded into the Orders of Love, conceptualized as impersonal forces that are upheld by a higher power. Hellinger rejected the idea that the orders were inventions of his own, emphasizing that his theories evolved in response to the scenes and systemic representations presented to him (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999). Nevertheless, the use of the term "order" introduces a religious tone, increasing the likelihood that the interpretation of his ideas would be taken as rigid rules rather than flexible guidelines, with implications for the application and understanding of his teachings. Evidence of this tension appears in an interview in which Hellinger stated:

When I recognize that an order is a certain way, then I see what I see. Some people who are accustomed to thinking in terms of "true and false" or "right and wrong" have a tendency to hear what I say as a statement about a general truth. It's not. It's only a recognition of the truth that could be glimpsed in a certain moment (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999, p. 91).

From Hellinger's perspective, these "orders" function as experiential insights rather than fixed doctrines designed to transcend the analytical intellect to connect individuals with a felt sense of a reality greater than the self. In practice, this allows facilitators to respond to what is visible in a given moment. The orders shift continuously and, according to Hellinger, can only be apprehended fully in brief, transient moments (2000).

Belonging & Bonding

The bonding principle refers to the social ties that connect an individual to a group. To ground this concept, Hellinger draws on the work of Konrad Lorenz, the Austrian zoologist, ethologist and ornithologist whose research on imprinting shaped early theories of psychoanalytic attachment, particularly within postwar psychoanalytic circles. Lorenz's studies of birds demonstrated that certain species form a lasting attachment to the first object they encounter after hatching, which is typically the mother (Vicedo, 2009). When this initial attachment occurs with a human or a different species, the animal often fails to develop typical social or sexual behaviors toward members of its own species (Vicedo, 2009). Lorenz argued that attachment is innate, genetically programmed, and irreversible once the critical period has passed, meaning it cannot be undone or reestablished later in life (Vicedo, 2009).

Building on Lorenz's findings, British psychiatrist John Bowlby extended these principles to human development. Bowlby emphasized the central importance of the mother-infant bond, arguing that early separation from the mother undermines the child's emotional security and weakens the foundations of personality development. His attachment theory framed the bond as instinctual, highlighting the urgency in mother-child relationship, positioning it as the bedrock upon which personality forms (Vicedo, 2009).

Within a family system, these bonding instincts regulate balance. Hellinger emphasizes that everyone in the family system has the right to belong, and tensions arise when individuals are excluded (Hellinger et al., 2009). A child's need to belong is so powerful that, regardless of the conditions for inclusion, children adapt to their group and environment with a tenacity comparable to imprinting (Hellinger et al., 2000). Achieving stature and independence within a group empowers individuals to relax, whereas experiences of weakness and dependence foster obedience and loyalty, which can generate negative imbalances within family systems (Hellinger et al. 2000).

Hellinger observed patterns of sexual bonding between adult partners, and proposed that a significant bond is formed through sexual relations regardless of the presence of romantic love. In his working hypothesis, sexual bonding operates as an independent variable, distinct from emotional attachment or affection, separating sex from love within the dynamics of adult relationships (Hellinger et al., 2000). He asserts that sexual bonding precedes love, as it represents a deeper, more primal connection that has the power to generate life (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999, p. 121). The implications of this theory becomes relevant in families where conception occurs as a result of nonconsensual sexual intercourse.

Equilibrium

The principle of equilibrium emphasizes the importance of balanced giving and taking in relationships. Our experiences of guilt and innocence originate from these exchanges; Feelings of entitlement emerge when we give and feelings of obligation arise when we take. Guilt is inevitable, because without a willingness to assume it, individuals cannot act effectively within

the system (Hellinger et al., 2000). The oscillation between entitlement and obligation mediates relational dynamics, resolving tensions that inevitably emerge from imbalances.

In adult relationships, stability is achieved when giving and taking are equal. Parent–child relationships follow a more one-sided dynamic where parents give and children receive. According to Boszormenyi-Nagy (2013), loyalty commitments in such relationships often arise from a sense of indebtedness to parents. Hellinger’s approach emphasizes the deeper workings of this dynamic, noting that parents provide children with the gift of life, a gift that cannot be reciprocated (Hellinger et al., 2009). Accepting the gift of life initiates a restorative process that can help reestablish balance within dysfunctional family systems, a process frequently observed in FC work.

Boszormenyi-Nagy (2013) extensively highlights how loyalty bonds run family systems. From a systemic perspective, loyalty reflects structured group expectations to which all members are committed. Guilt is naturally ingrained and functions as a bonding principle. Boszormenyi-Nagy said: “Homeostasis of the obligation or loyalty system depends thus on a regulatory input of guilt” (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 2013, p. 38). The operation of a loyalty-driven system depends on multiple mechanisms, such as external coercion, conscious recognition of the benefits of membership, acknowledged feelings of obligation, and unconscious attachments to the group (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 2013). Members bound by loyalty commitments often act out of duty, fairness, or justice, sometimes without fully recognizing the deeper dynamics at play, which often remain invisible. Hellinger’s work identifies, untangles and restores order in a group therapeutic container.

Order

The principle of order speaks to innate hierarchy and a felt sense of peace within the family system. According to Hellinger (2000), maintaining the chronological order of family members is essential for accurately representing the dynamics within the family system. In this way, parents come before children, the parent's relationship as a couple takes precedence over their parenthood, older siblings come before younger, first spouses precede subsequent spouses and so on (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999). The concept of order also speaks to the felt experience of something being in order, which offers peace, flow, a sense of relief, and synergy (Hellinger & ten Hövel, 1999).

Comparative Analysis

Situating FC within the psychotherapeutic modalities that shaped its development deepens our understanding of its significance, appeal, and the criticisms in contemporary psychology. It must be emphasized that Hellinger's approach is grounded in a spiritual ontology and stands in contrast to empirically validated therapies. Asserting that spirituality and science are inseparable, Hellinger advanced an epistemology that blends a spiritual perspective with a form of intuitive *gestalts* (e.g. Individuals belong to a family soul). Additionally, his ethical orientation is hedonistic in the sense that he prioritizes what he sees and the embodied experience: somatic intelligence becomes the primary source of meaning and validation for his ideas.

As noted, FC is a group therapy model that draws inspiration from Psychodrama, Family Reconstruction, and Transactional Analysis. While psychodrama serves as a foundational prototype for experiential group therapy, FC differs significantly in its implementation, emphasizing systemic representation, phenomenological observation, and the facilitation of relational dynamics in place of dramatic enactment or role-based catharsis.

Traditional psychodrama follows a structured format consisting of a group warm-up, an action phase, and group processing. On the psychodramatic stage, the ego of the protagonist mediates the group work. Members in the audience, called auxiliary egos, play people, voices, and objects as a supportive extension of the protagonist's inner world. The therapist checks in with the protagonist about what the auxiliary egos are saying to see how it lands with them throughout the exercises. These voices help the protagonists explore emotions and gain insights toward a new perspective emerging within and around their ego's conscious awareness. The aim of the work is to facilitate progress in the individual's therapeutic process, inviting access to more creativity and spontaneity.

In contrast, in FC, the seeker maintains the role of observer while their concerns are enacted spatially by selected representatives within the group. Unlike psychodrama, the protagonist doesn't directly engage in the constellation until the very end in select cases. Instead, a representative acts out the protagonist on their behalf, allowing them to remain observers to be moved by the unfolding drama. This process prioritizes perceptions reported by representatives over the individual's ego perception of the story unfolding within the *knowing field*, likened to a data cloud, where constellation participants have direct, embodied, and emotional access to the thoughts, feelings, and sensations of the individuals they represent (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019, p. 474). These somatic sensations, emotional responses, and spontaneous physical movements are understood to reveal underlying systemic dynamics with entangled ancestors that contribute to the presenting issue. Representatives are not role-playing like they are expected to in psychodrama, instead, they embody specific family members through representative perception. Once the constellation concludes, participants formally release their roles. In this approach, group sharing is not facilitated by design.

Despite their differences, both psychodrama and FC suggest that therapeutic work operates within a broader, cosmic dimension that transcends material reality. Moreno described this as *surplus reality*, in which the boundaries of the self extend far beyond what is consciously recognized or constrained by the limits of reality. He held a deep belief in the timelessness of God, seeing this work as a channel for divine inspiration. Similarly, Hellinger proposed that individuals transcend the confines of their personal identity to connect with the family system, ancestors, and a greater spiritual source. Access to spirit comes through from the family of origin in the gift of life. In a numinous space called the *knowing field*, Hellinger recalls how past, present, and future converge in a single moment, allowing a family system to restore balance and harmony to disruptive dynamics to facilitate personal and collective breakthroughs.

Hellinger's understanding of the greater whole was also shaped by Gestalt theory; its holistic and phenomenological orientation significantly influenced the development of his theories and approach. Grounded in existential philosophy, Gestalt emphasizes direct, somatic experiencing in the therapeutic exchange. Renowned therapist Fritz Perls shared the importance of integrating fragmented parts into a whole. Perls said that "missing parts in the human being prevent him from functioning wholesomely" (Shostrom & Psychological and Educational Films, 2021). Hellinger extended this principle from the individual to the family system, emphasizing that the family shapes the wholeness of the individual's conscious and unconscious experience of reality. Symptoms are understood as manifestations of systemic imbalance, when the flow of love within the system is disrupted. This often arises when family members are excluded or marginalized.

From this perspective, human perception is shaped by selective biases and distortions outside conscious awareness, which often perpetuates rigid, outdated behavioral patterns (Walsh

et al., 2014). The task of the gestalt approach is to engage the clients to facilitate the reintegration of disowned or fragmented aspects of the psyche. This is done through emphasizing awareness of perceptions with an embodied experience (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). This principle is practiced through experiential techniques, most notably the empty-chair exercise, a psychodramatic role-reversal technique, where the client engages in a dialogical process by alternately speaking as themselves and then adopting the perspective of the person with whom they are in conflict. Through this exercise, the client externalizes internal tensions, reduces rigidity, and works toward a new capacity for a creative, open-ended approach to living (Walsh et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the earliest iterations of what would later become Hellinger's FC resembled the groundbreaking work of Virginia Satir's Family Reconstruction Therapy. Satir's format involved small-group work where participants were assigned and positioned to represent members of the client's family system called the family sculpture. This spatial reenactment of relational dynamics became the foundation for the therapeutic process, allowing implicit patterns and emotional bonds within the system to emerge to be addressed and processed. Satir observed that when placing people in physical stances, feelings from those stances informed the individual's representation (Cohen, 2009). She understood the power of somatic embodiment in emotional processing for individuals and groups alike, inspiring generations of therapists.

Hellinger trained with Satir-inspired American therapists Ruth McClendon and Leslie Kadis, who taught him family sculpture techniques. He returned to Europe to study with Hamburg-based German psychiatrist, Thea Schönfelder, before developing his own distinctive method (Cohen, 2009). He demonstrates a consistent commitment to working from a simplified, yet holistic framework. Cohen (2009) recalls how exposure to these specific trainings inspired

Hellinger to strip back the “kinetic and verbal elements from the role-playing dramatizations” in order to allow his unique approach to present itself in a more deliberate and directed way (p. 107). Hellinger’s approach emphasized the role of the facilitator in filtering material to be worked out within a FC. Cohen recalled: “It is from this arresting of motion and language that the movements and insights of the Family Constellations process emerged” (2009, p. 107). By moving away from emotional narratives into a seat of observation, Hellinger identified hidden loyalties bound within the family unconscious to release (Cohen, 2009).

This approach differed from traditional psychotherapy in that Hellinger deprioritized eliciting detailed descriptions of clients’ problems. He sought for the root of the problem from a wider perspective; He explains, “the correct description of a problem contains the resolution to the problem” (Hellinger et al., 2000, p. 221). He further conceptualizes systemic problems as “unsuccessful attempts to love” positioning the facilitator’s first task as helping clients “find an appropriate and mature way to love...and the same love that maintains the problem resolves it” (Hellinger et al., 2000, p. 220). Following therapeutic resolution, Hellinger rejects the mind’s impulse to theorize solutions, noting that theory often fails to “convey the wholeness of the experience” (Hellinger et al., 2000, p. 220, reinforcing his commitment to working phenomenologically.

Hellinger (2000) conceptualized the family system as a shared soul bound by a common fate. He proposed that the family soul carries a group conscience that connects members across generations, transcending time and physical distance (Hellinger et al., 2000). Family therapist Boszormenyi-Nagy (2013) acknowledged the powerful and often elusive force embedded within family structures, describing family relationships as an extremely complex system operating through an “unknown mechanism” (p. 1). Both theorists observed a regulatory force, though

Hellinger framed it through the family system restoring equilibrium through compensatory action of giving and taking, while Boszormenyi-Nagy emphasized the complexity of invisible loyalties that sought balance through the regulation of guilt and the pursuit of relational justice.

The health of the individual within a family system is shaped by recurring patterns within the group. It is these very relational dynamics that FC seeks to explore in depth. Traditional family therapists emphasized the importance of examining multigenerational patterns, particularly through significant family milestones such as births, deaths, and illnesses. Boszormenyi-Nagy (2013) underscored the necessity of this investigation for grounding the client within their broader familial context in therapy. He argued that “without an interest in these formative, long-range, vertical family relational laws of function, the therapist will remain handicapped in dealing with pathogenicity and health in families” (p. 1). In this way, the individual’s mental and physical wellbeing must be considered within a wider context that contains the family system in their therapeutic treatment.

Eric Berne’s theory that three ego states remain active within the individual’s psyche throughout life is further expanded on in Hellinger’s model. Rather than understanding the child, parent and adult roles as intrapsychic states operating within the individual, Hellinger works with these forces as relational positions within the family system. In constellations, these roles become externalized and embodied through representatives, allowing dynamics that may typically be experienced internally to be observed and engaged externally at a systemic level.

In most constellations, the focus works on the family of origin, where each child is intrinsically connected to their parents through blind love and loyalty, even if the protagonist is an adult. Through representative processes, FC facilitates dialogue through suggested healing

sentences or ritual bowing between the protagonist and members of the family system to externalize dysfunctional social dynamics and transactions that lead to exploitation. In doing so, previously hidden dynamics and ulterior transactions are externalized, clarified, and more easily distinguished, allowing systemic patterns to emerge into conscious awareness. In TA terms, this heightened awareness creates the possibility of revising one's life script through exposure to a new relational perspective. However, the source of the life script becomes an important distinction for the therapeutic posture. Berne theorized the lifscript developed from early prenatal messages, while Hellinger speculated that the source can extend beyond generations where life scripts can be influenced by what others in the family system have experienced or suffered (Cohen, 2009).

Professional Criticism

Scholarly discourse reveals several critical perspectives regarding FC. Clinical psychologists in Poland contest whether FC fulfills the code of ethics for psychotherapists established by the Polish Psychiatric Association. Dr. Małgorzata Talarczyk's analysis of FC concludes that the process, contract, diagnosis, supervision, and confidentiality of FC are not eligible to meet the basic criteria of psychotherapy, which is a process and not a short term solution (Talarczyk, 2011). According to Dr. Talarczyk (2011), psychotherapy involves the informed and intentional application of clinical methods to help individuals modify their behaviors, cognitions, and emotions in ways they find desirable, which is not applied in the FC approach.

Dr. Talarczyk (2011) also raises concerns about the qualifications of facilitators in FC, whom Hellinger calls helpers or facilitators rather than therapists. Even though she represents one opinion in the field, she suggests that the use of projection and transference in constellations

introduces dynamics that diverge significantly from standard psychotherapeutic practices. She questions whether participants in these sessions discover their issues independently or are influenced by the facilitator's guidance. Furthermore, she argues that clients in FC are prone to being highly suggestible, relying more on the facilitator's interpretations and the perspectives of representatives than on their own emotions or reflections about their life circumstances.

Understanding one's own perspective and factors shaped it is a cornerstone of psychotherapy, an element that Dr. Talarczyk considers amiss in this approach.

German Psychologist Franz Ruppert, a former student of Hellinger, became one of the most prominent critics of FC. Ruppert developed his own trauma-informed therapeutic model, Identity-Oriented Psychotrauma Theory (IoPT) in response to issues he took with ritualized elements in Hellinger's traditional approach (Stjernswärd, 2021). Ruppert (2022) critically examined the practice of bowing to one's parents, a central healing movement in traditional FC, thus raising concerns about its application in cases of severe trauma. He argued that actions may risk idealizing or symbolically elevating perpetrators, reinforcing traumatic dynamics rather than facilitating genuine integration.

IoPT emphasizes the impact of early trauma on identity development, resulting in the psyche's split within the personality structure as a survival mechanism in response to trauma (Stjernswärd, 2021). Instead of working with the family system as the larger whole, IoPT prioritizes the exploration of a client's internal psychological system (Stjernswärd, 2021). In this model, the client identifies a personal intention that serves as the focal point for a group process. The group represents symbols and words from the stated intention and share their experience. Clients embody different parts of the split psyche that generate internal conflict to process inner tensions, entanglements, and traumatic imprints so they can be consciously integrated

(Stjernswärd, 2021). This process also works phenomenologically with the aim to strengthen a coherent sense of identity, enhance autonomy, free will, and increase psychological flexibility to foster self-regulation (Stjernswärd, 2021).

On a larger scale, FC have caused critical complications within various international contexts. Following Brazil's incorporation of FC in the legal system in 2018, backlash has emerged against the widespread psychological adoption of FC's employment as a conflict resolution strategy in Brazil's legal system. Although FC is not conducted by judges as an official court ruling, it is used as an alternative dispute resolution tool by which litigants, their attorneys, and a FC facilitator, with voluntary representatives, collaborate to expedite conciliation and mediation on behalf of their clients. Fernanda Muzzi De Freitas (2023) argues that FC resolves conflicts faster than the legal system, which moves slowly leaving official proceedings unresolved. This has created fierce debates from professionals working within the legal field around FC's place in family and criminal law.

Other countries are grappling with FC's place and its greater psychological application. As of January 2026, the Order of Psychologists of Quebec, the psychological licensing body of the region, took a position that it considers FC to legally be a psychotherapy, meaning only licensed professionals may practice it, however, because FC is not a scientifically validated therapy, licensed professionals are ethically prohibited from using it, putting a ban on the practice (Vandeveld, 2026).

Situating Family Constellations within the Context of Western Esotericism

While FC does not align with traditional definitions of therapy, alternative conceptual frameworks may provide a more suitable lens for understanding and contextualizing this

distinctive approach. Situating FC within the context of western esotericism invites renewed attention to a dimension of psychology that has often been marginalized, despite early psychological frameworks engaging with parapsychological or esoteric undercurrents (Ellenberger, 1970).

Júlia Gyimesi's (2022) contemporary scholarship offers a compelling argument that FC belongs within the tradition of Western Esotericism. Gyimesi demonstrates how FC's theories resonate with key principles of Western esoteric thought, a tradition that historically operates at the intersection of science and religion. Gyimesi (2022) references the scholarship of Antoine Faivre, who developed four primary, intrinsic principles that define western esotericism.

Correspondences: Symbolic and material correspondences exist universally and are interdependent on each other. This principle assumes a hidden dimension where connections are made that are often invisible to the untrained eye, and only accessible through interpretation and decoding. Instead of relying solely on the logic of cause and effect, this perspective embraces a mediating ground that invites synchronicities to define experiences beyond linear explanation. In this way, events are connected through meaning over causation (Gyimesi, 2022).

Living Nature: Nature offers multi-layered dimensions, all parts of which are alive with intelligent life force. According to this idea, the universe operates as a “complex, plural, hierarchical entity that is animated throughout by a living energy or soul” rich in revelations that are divine, potent, and meaningful (Gyimesi, 2022 p. 751).

Imagination and Meditations: Imagination opens the capacity to read, interpret and engage with symbolism. Through the practice of meditation, gnosis manifests as an awareness or perception of the self and the soul. Meditative practices work to “establish a

cognitive and visionary relationship with the intermediary world where transmission can occur” (Gyimesi, 2022, p. 751).

Experience of Transmutation: A powerful change of state that facilitates a form of rebirth, characterized by profound physical, psychological, or spiritual reorientation, resulting in the emergence of new behavioral patterns, cognitive frameworks, or life choices (Gyimesi, 2022).

The placement of Family Constellations within the Western esoteric tradition can be understood through its guiding principles and applications. Attuned to correspondences, the facilitator “intuits a so-called hidden dynamic that is purported to be at the source of the seeker’s current issue” (Cohen, 2009, p. 95). Within this framework, the family is perceived as the primary source of life, offering an intimate connection to a living world. This connection, both spiritual and physical, establishes a hierarchical and intelligent cosmos within this living system.

The ritual language used to facilitate a psychological and emotional impact powerfully invokes the imagination. Simple phrases such as “I lived, and you died” and “I am little, you are big” carry symbolic weight, guiding participants through moments that reorient dynamics to acknowledge *what is* during the intervention. The language extends to symbolic gestures, such as a bow to acknowledge the fate of a family member who may have suffered. In traditional constellations, sessions typically end with the protagonist bowing to the mother and accepting her as the infallible source of life, regardless of her personal failings. This serves as a symbolic act of taking one’s life from the source without judgement.

The goal of this therapeutic intervention is to provide a profound experience that enables individuals to gain agency and heal relational dynamics within their family system. The impact of this work extends beyond the individual, reaching into the ancestral field and transmuting

grief, pain, and sorrow into a process of healing. Through subtle yet profound shifts in perception, this approach seeks to restructure the “social-familial fabric” by supporting personal choices that liberate individuals from unconscious, fated patterns (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019, p. 489).

This practice presently exists on the margins of mainstream religious, academic, and scientific discourse, therefore, its association with Western esotericism does not diminish its legitimacy or potency. Rather, FC’s ongoing struggle to locate a clear identity within contemporary culture has made it difficult to define and systematically study. Situating it within a Western esoteric framework may offer a more coherent sense of its purpose and function, enabling both practitioners and communities to better understand its role. Neither a science nor a religion, this practice may be more fully interpreted, explored, or quantified through an esoteric lens that captures its metaphysical dimensionality and spiritual strength.

Biological, Evolutionary & Epigenetic Perspectives

Up to this point, this work has examined how FC has developed through its exposure to psychological frameworks. To meet the demands of contemporary standards and practice, investigating scientific theories is essential for professional communities to engage with it more rigorously. Although FC has gained popularity without a scientific validation, establishing scientific grounding is critical to explain its mechanisms and potential. This section aims to contribute theoretical insights to expand its scientific potential.

Bert Hellinger stated “we share a family *consciousness* with our biological family members who come before us” and modern scientific research validates this perspective (Wolyn, 2016, p. 44). Turning to evolutionary biology, the concept of symbiogenesis explains how, at the

earliest stages of evolutionary biology, organisms acquired traits from their environment through the integration of genetic material from surrounding organisms in order to evolve (Cohen 2024). As lifeforms evolved in the wake of shifting environments, balancing environmental conditions through homeostasis became crucial for survival.

American evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis discovered the development of the earliest cells through “Organelle Genesis Theory” which posits that organelles, which are the structures within a cell, are a result of single cells organisms being swallowed by early eukaryotic cells, thus becoming symbiotic parts of the larger cell (Torday & Miller, 2020 p. 8). Her work illustrates symbiogenesis in action, exploring how interactions among organisms at the cellular level were crucial to the evolutionary development of more complex life forms. This perspective highlights interconnected living organisms, where the survival and optimal functioning of the whole depend on each individual within it.

As genetic flexibility evolved, it procured a profound and complex biological interconnectedness that expands across generations. Author and FC expert Mark Wolyn offers a fascinating perspective on the biological inheritance of transgenerational dynamics in his book *It Didn't Start with You*. He explains: “when your grandmother was five months pregnant with your mother, the precursor cell of the egg you developed from, was already present in your mother’s ovaries” (Wolyn, 2016, p. 25). This means that three generations, the grandmother, mother and child, coexist within one body at the same time. Such maternal interconnection provides a biological substrate for the transmission of family experiences, patterns, and stories across generations, embedding these influences in the body long before they reach conscious awareness.

Epigenetics provides a framework for understanding how trauma can be passed down through generations. Research has shown that epigenetic adjustments, which are alterations in gene expression in response to environmental factors, can be inherited. Geneticist Barbara McClintock presented groundbreaking research that uncovered how DNA can relocate within a genome, revealing how genetic flexibility in the process of genetic evolution works (Torday & Miller, 2020). This discovery expanded our understanding of how DNA functions, moving beyond the traditional view of genetic mutations. Her work exposed how genetic forms express creativity and strategy, rather than mere randomness or natural selection (Torday & Miller, 2020). This implies the presence of a regulatory mechanism within the genetic network, orchestrated by groups of genes that enable genetic recombination and transfer that facilitate the evolution of individual genes in the context of an operational system (Torday & Miller, 2020).

This regulatory biological mechanism is similar to the idea of the family soul in FC, which is a collective system that connects all members in a family (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019). According to the FC theory proposed by Hellinger, the family soul holds memories, traumas, and loyalties that promote an unconscious yet powerful bond. Perhaps there is a biological grounding of the family soul that can be traced back to our blood and DNA. This concept was vividly illustrated in a FC case study featuring Gracie from Beijing, China. Gracie shared: “When I did that exercise, the feeling was particularly deep...I was intensely emotional. Actually, the blood flowing in your veins is their blood” (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019, p. 484). Ancestral blood may serve as an intelligent biological medium through which ancestral lines communicate within the self, often beyond conscious awareness.

Furthermore, epigenetic research offers compelling evidence that trauma can be inherited and passed down through generations. Studies conducted by Yehuda and Lehrner (2018) provide

evidence on how genes can impact family systems at individual levels. Their research posits that parental trauma can affect offspring even before their birth, including traumas that occurred prior to conception. They outline two mechanisms through which trauma responses and DNA changes are transmitted: the first is through developmental programming, where environmental trauma experienced in utero influences offspring development. The second is parental trauma that's present before conception, which becomes encoded in germ cells that directly impact subsequent generations (Yehuda et al., 2018). Both mechanisms affect inheritable DNA, reinforcing the concept of transgenerational trauma and its profound impact on adaptation and behavior (Yehuda et al., 2018). This finding suggests that transgenerational epigenetic inheritance remains active within bodies and is transmitted through intelligent biological processes as a means of adapting and communicating higher chances of survival across generations.

Quantum Influences

FC challenges conventional notions of consciousness, proposing that it functions both locally within individuals and non-locally across family systems. Drawing on an analogy to the quantum physics principle where particles can exist in multiple states simultaneously, FC suggests that consciousness is simultaneously individual and interconnected. Its nature becomes evident through the ways one engages with it, particularly through the body. One of the foundational hypotheses for FC work outlined by Dan Cohen posits that: "The body's capacity to access and transmit information from the quantum field allows for reconnection with ancestors through their living representations." (2024 p. 36). Representation becomes an embodied means of accessing a family system's consciousness, allowing it to be experienced both collectively by individuals at local levels and through groups of representatives at broader, non-local levels.

Furthermore, quantum theories of consciousness proposed by scholars Zhi and Xui (2023) suggests that everything exists within the quantum vibrational field, allowing brainwaves to synchronize instantaneously, not only within an individual's brain and body, but also across different people and even with objects, proposing a theory for how representation consciousness could work. This theory highlights the interconnectedness of all things through a shared, vibrating energy that can influence both physical and mental processes. Beings and objects absorb quantum vibrations through a process known as resonance. The reception and processing of these vibrations, including information, energy, and matter, give rise to our subjective conscious experiences (Zhi and Xui, 2023).

By engaging directly with consciousness in what might be called "quantum time," FC fosters a participatory universe where experiential and sensory awareness, referred to as qualia, plays a central role. Qualia encompass the subjective qualities of sensation, images, feelings and thoughts. In FC, representatives access qualia data by engaging directly with the thoughts, feelings and sensations of the person they are representing, engaging directly with quantum consciousness through resonance. Research suggests that "qualia, not quanta, are the building blocks of nature" which requires a paradigm shift of how we define and quantify the nature of reality (Chopra & Kafatos, 2014 p. 288). In their research, Chopra and Kafatos challenge the concept of a purely objective reality, proposing a subjective frame of reference where the active and participatory role of consciousness influences our worldview (Chopra & Kafatos, 2014 p. 293). Participation plays a key role when engaging with quantum levels of reality in FC.

This is historically explored through the observer effect, which is the most well-established concept in quantum physics. This phenomenon was first documented in the famous double-slit experiment, where particles were directed at a barrier with two slits, which

described how the act of observing or measuring a quantum particle can profoundly influence its behavior. Observed particles exhibited both wave-like and particle-like properties, existing as waves when unobserved and as discrete particles when measured. This phenomenon highlights the role of the importance of an observer in shaping the outcome of events (Cohen, 2024).

Quantum physics sets the stage for morphogenetic fields, which offers an alternative way to understand the presence of the past in structures of reality. Rupert Sheldrake describes morphogenetic fields as non-visible geometry of life that extends beyond our quantitative existence. These fields are created from signals that carry information about organisms existing and future patterns. They simultaneously hold memories and are influenced by what has happened before operating across a spacetime continuum (Sheldrake, 1988).

This framework is particularly significant in FC, as the system operates on the premise that the self serves as a repository of everything that has occurred within a family (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019, p. 472). Through this lens, participants can access a pre-existing field to address and work through familial trauma. Sheldrake broadens this concept by extending the sphere of influence to group consciousness, proposing that “all past members of a species influence the field, their influence is cumulative” (Sheldrake, 1988, p. 109). This perspective suggests that the field not only transcends the individual and the family system but also operates on a collective scale, positioning the individual in relation to the family as the family relates to the collective.

Family stories explored in FC can range from personal experiences within the family system to collective political or social tragedies that have shaped both the family and broader communities. Through these dynamics, individuals can experience entanglement with their ancestors. This concept can be understood through the concept of quantum entanglement, which occurs when two particles exist in an entangled state whereas “if an observer determines the state

of one such particle, its entangled counterpart will instantly reflect that state” (Cohen, 2024, pg 34). In this way, two seemingly unrelated particles can in fact be interconnected even if that connection is invisible. Hellinger also uses the word entanglement to describe the suffering that emerges when a protagonist attempts to take on the fate of a relative or ancestor.

Sheldrake posits that morphogenetic fields exist in physical reality, offering a theory for why representatives could have sensory reactions, like headaches or back pain during FC sessions even when it is not their own. This perspective also sheds light on how unconscious entanglement can manifest as physical symptoms. Quantum or ancestral entanglement may occur across generations, despite not sharing physical presence with each other in space and time. This would rely on the assumption that “human consciousness persists beyond bodily death” and therefore makes an impact on the present moment (Cohen 2024 p. 36).

Additionally, the importance of the observer effect can not be understated in FC. A protagonist's beliefs serve as measurements of an experience within family systems, which are often bound in time. Through participation in this psycho-spiritual healing framework, a world of potentiality and new possibilities unfolds, allowing individuals to process, experience, integrate, and effectively reprogram a revised reality into their current life structure. This process can shift their perception of the past within the present moment. Ancestors hold the memory of these fields, and by consciously accessing and engaging with them, it unlocks the potential for healing that spans across generations.

By recognizing that ancestors live on within the psyche and that their experiences are encoded and passed down through DNA, FC invites them to participate in the lives of future generations. Severing communication with the part of the psyche linked to ancestral memory risks limiting our understanding of the roots of suffering, which may stem from unresolved

conflicts that extend beyond the individual to the family. This work reconfigures the boundaries between the self and the family in innovative ways, creating “a collective space for shared moral reflection on troubling social, historical, and cultural patterns” (Pritzker & Duncan, 2019, p. 468).

Honoring one’s place within the family system opens access to a quantum field where transformational healing can occur. Sheldrake was likely intimately familiar with and influenced by Family Constellations, as his wife, Jill Purce, works as a prominent Family Constellations therapist in the United Kingdom, providing him with direct exposure to Hellinger’s work and the concept of the “knowing field,” which parallels the qualities he describes in his morphic field theory. By addressing and healing generational trauma within the morphic field, the collective memory itself can undergo a shift. This process of healing holds profound potential, generating change that extends from the individual to the family, the community, that can ultimately impact the wider world.

Clinical Study of Family Constellations

FC has not received empirical validation, either during or following Hellinger’s lifetime. Hellinger did not establish a precedent for investigating his approach through scientifically validated methodologies, as he resisted separating spirituality from science and literature. Instead, his work emphasized lived, experiential insight over systematic empirical evaluation (Hellinger et al., 2000). Hellinger approached FC as a working philosophy, a theory with universal principles that became individualized through application and observation. Its naturalistic approach resists strict reproducibility of controlled scientific conditions, as insights typically emerge through observation rather than experimentally replicable variables. However,

this phenomenological approach also contributed to criticisms of his work as pseudoscientific, rendering it invalid and immeasurable.

Although FC has often been dismissed as pseudoscience, much of this criticism arose before rigorous scientific investigations were undertaken or its practical applications were systematically evaluated. To date, however, the available evidence remains methodologically limited, preventing definitive conclusions either in support of or against its validity. Although randomized controlled trials are beginning to examine its efficacy, existing study designs still require substantial methodological refinement to yield more conclusive findings.

A randomized controlled trial conducted in Germany, the country of FC's origin, by Hunger, Bornhauser, Link, Schweitzer, and Weinhold demonstrated the short-term efficacy of FC on measures of belonging, autonomy, accord, and confidence at two weeks and four months post-intervention (2013). Looking to examine the efficacy of FC, the intervention was facilitated as a one-time, 3-day workshop seminar in a group counseling context called a Family Constellations Seminar (FCS).

The questions that drove the researchers were whether methodologically sound procedures could demonstrate the psychological efficacy of FCS in non-clinical populations. The hypothesis put forward by the researchers posits that if nonclinical populations participate in a 3-day FCS then they will gain improved general psychological functioning 2 weeks and 4 months post treatment (Weinhold et al., 2013). They also conducted a secondary analysis to assess whether reductions in motivational incongruence, defined as difficulty achieving one's goals, and psychological distress followed the intervention (Holtforth and Grawe, 2003). Researchers hypothesized that decreasing motivational incongruence would improve

psychological well-being (Weinhold et al., 2013). The study's conclusions demonstrated small to medium statistically significant improvements across the three outcome measures for the treatment group with psychological effects sustained at four months, though not to the same extent as those observed in multi-session psychotherapy treatments (Weinhold et al., 2013).

The study employed broad outcome measures for psychological functioning. Researchers used the self-report OQ-45.2 questionnaire in the assessment stage to gauge participants' emotional and psychological well-being, tracking changes over time in symptom distress, interpersonal relationships, and social functioning (OQ Measures, 2018). This measure holds a strong test-retest reliability reported at .84 and internal consistency reported at .93. Psychological distress was measured using the Questionnaire for the Evaluation of Treatment Progress (FEP) a 40 item measure that reports a solid test-retest reliability at .77 and internal consistency at .94. This also measures wellbeing, incongruence, and interpersonal problems (Lutz and Böhnke, 2008). Lastly, motivational incongruence was measured using the Incongruence Questionnaire (INK-SF) with test-retest validity scoring high at .81 with internal consistencies ranging from .75 to .91 (Holtforth and Grawe, 2003). There is a mismatch between the measures used and the population studied; The measures were designed for clinical populations, while this study involved a non-clinical sample, introducing concerns about measurement accuracy and validity of the overall study design.

Study participants were recruited through voluntary interest via email or phone outreach. The study reports that 208 adults participated in the experiment with low attrition. In 39 instances, payment was identified as a barrier for participation, suggesting that motivation to participate could have already been seen as a valuable exchange by study members (Weinhold et al., 2013). In psychological research, it's standard for participants to be compensated for their

time and effort instead of being required to pay to participate, which poses significant external validity issues.

Furthermore, the intervention and waitlist groups had similar qualities each consisting of 104 German participants who were mostly women (79%) middle aged, educated, partnered, and working in helping professions. Most notably, 80% of the study population was already predisposed to FCT. The familiarity of the population is a challenge for the internal and external validity. This is further illustrated in the third assessment log, which reports that four participants from the waitlist group and three from the experimental group engaged in an additional FCT session prior to study completion, deviating from participant protocol.

There are experiment design oversights in the study population that introduce self-selection bias, expectation bias, and confirmation bias that limits generalizability to the broader population, which threatens both internal and external validity. Improvements in study population should include controlling for participants' prior familiarity with or engagement in FCS, as this may have acted as a confound. Additionally, gender should be controlled, since the sample was predominantly female. Without this control, it remains unclear whether the observed effects reflect FCS's efficacy in the general population or are specific to women. Because many participants work in helping professions (between 52-63%), they do not represent the population of interest and may be predisposed to experience positive effects from the intervention due to the nature of their work.

In an effort to enhance internal validity, the researchers attempted to standardize the treatment protocol by developing a manual that specified mandatory procedures and provided operational definitions for both the seminar as a whole and each individual family constellation (Weinhold et al., 2013). Two members of the research team independently rated treatment

procedures according to the manual. Although the interrater reliability was reported to be high (over 96%), the lack of variability in the ratings limits confidence in the reliability of the measurement method, thereby weakening the assessment. In the discussion section of the report, the researchers disclosed that five of the seven researchers on the team were systemic psychotherapists, which introduces potential bias in group processes and outcomes compromising internal validity (Weinhold et al., 2013). Participants and facilitators didn't know which treatment they were in to minimize expectation bias, however, outcome researchers did, which contributes to observer bias. Overall, internal validity could be improved with a double-blind study design.

The experimental design conducted a prospective short-term longitudinal study that researchers described as a monocentric, single-blind, stratified, and balanced randomized controlled trial (Weinhold et al., 2013). However, there wasn't a true control group because both populations received the treatment, one just received it sooner and the other after 4 months, which can generate expectancy effects or placebo impacts from anticipation of coming treatment. There should have been a true control group that didn't receive any treatment to promote findings of efficacy. While the study said it implemented stratified and balanced groupings, it was only partially stratified because active and observing participants self selected which introduces confounding issues. More specifically, self-selecting active participants compared with self-selecting observing participants may have pre-existing differences and therefore should have been randomly assigned to mitigate threats of internal validity. It remains unclear whether the observed treatment outcomes resulted from the intervention itself or from differences in personality and motivational factors between the groups.

The experiment was conducted at a single location to control for locationally induced differences and strengthen internal validity, however, this monocentric design limits generalizability, as results may differ across populations, settings, or cultural contexts. To account for this limitation, multi-site trials could better account for external validity. Additionally, two facilitators conducted the treatment based on their experience and background, which is not reflective of the general population of FCS facilitators. The eligibility criteria maintained that the facilitators were licensed psychiatrists or psychotherapists, have 20 years professional experience, and have 10 years professional FCS experience (Weinhold et al., 2013). Family Constellations facilitators in real-world settings are typically not licensed professionals or clinicians, so the generalizability of the results may be limited due to facilitator effects. Although the study attempted to standardize facilitation procedures, the lack of reported interrater reliability calls the procedure's consistency into question.

Improvements in the study design are essential. A no-treatment control group would allow researchers to determine the efficacy of the intervention. Another option, using an active control group, such as participants in other group therapies like psychodrama, would allow evaluation of whether Family Constellations therapy yields superior outcomes. To better advance psychological research, it would be appropriate to design a study evaluating FCS as a one-off intervention for clients within clinical populations, alongside their ongoing therapy and treatment goals, to assess how the experience may support long-term therapeutic outcomes. This approach would allow outcome measures tailored to clinical populations to more effectively inform the study design for the population of interest.

Recruiting a more representative sample through true randomization rather than self-selection would strengthen the study's validity. To increase internal validity, the study

population should not pay to attend, be compensated for their time, and not be predisposed to the FC approach. Furthermore, participant assignment to active or observing roles within the intervention should be randomized and stratified. Facilitators should better reflect current professional standards within the FC field, while being observed in a more naturalistic environment. Facilitators and study participants should both have access to psychologists or psychiatrists to address any emergent issues during the study without compromising the integrity of the reported outcomes.

Future FC research has the opportunity to systematically investigate the spiritual impact of FC interventions among clinically depressed populations whose depressive symptoms span across multiple generations. Research by psychologist Lisa Miller (2021) highlights the neurobiological relevance of spirituality as a mitigating factor when treating clinically depressed populations, particularly when studied across multiple generations. Her work demonstrates associations between increased cortical thickness and reduced depressive symptoms (Miller, 2021). Such findings suggest that spiritual development promotes mental health improvement and should be considered when assessing therapeutic effectiveness for spiritually-informed interventions.

Additionally, incorporating validated measures of spiritual identity and transformation would strengthen current research. For example, the Interbeing Identity Scale (IIS) is a brief, reliable instrument grounded in phenomenological theory that assesses identity transformation following spiritually based interventions (Frymann 2023). Utilizing tools such as the IIS could help determine whether FC interventions produce measurable changes in participants' perspectives and worldviews pre and post intervention, thus clarifying the role of spiritual awareness in FC's therapeutic effectiveness.

Evolving Practice & Future Directions

As is common in the evolution of psychological thought, FC both evolved and bifurcated during Hellinger's lifetime. Practitioners who trained with and developed alongside him in the 1980s and 1990s consolidated what later became known as the traditional school. By the 2000s, this traditional group had formalized a distinct methodology: the process begins with a client presenting an issue, representatives for the parents and, excluded ancestors, are brought into the field. Through ancestral representation, guided by the *Orders of Love*, a healing movement unfolds, which often takes the form of bowing to and/or embracing one or both parents.

As previously noted, some first-generation practitioners, including Franz Ruppert, diverged from Hellinger's methodology by integrating contemporary trauma theory to replace the traditional practice. Others built upon the systemic principles of representation while expanding the focus beyond family systems, often referring to their work simply as constellations or systemic constellations. These developments within the constellations community introduced fresh approaches that extended the scope and application of the work to broader social systems, including corporations, organizations, sports teams, and even nations (Cohen, personal communication, February 6, 2026). Rather than solely addressing family-based issues, these approaches often begin with the seeker's intention, working with representations and entanglements that may involve family members and ancestors, or extend beyond the family system to include concepts, archetypes, spiritual figures, or symbolic objects. In doing so, these practitioners forged a new pathway that preserved the core principles of systemic representation while greatly broadening its application beyond Hellinger's principles and method.

Leaders in this approach include Dan Cohen who trained with Hellinger's first-generation students and has since led a private practice for over 25 years, as well as an educational

organization, *Seeing with Your Heart*. Cohen teaches a masterclass called *Science, Myth, and Magic* and leads *Alchemical Constellations Training (ACT)* with his partner Emily Blefeld, LICSW. Cohen's teaching focuses on the process of representation, guiding students to remain grounded in ordinary reality while cultivating embodied awareness as "receivers of non-local consciousness" (Cohen, 2024). His training emphasizes maintaining clear perceptual boundaries and reflective capacity, enabling students to differentiate authentic representational attunement from projection, role enactment, or accessing psychologically vulnerable states (e.g., psychosis) (personal communication, February 6, 2026).

The principles that ground Cohen's (2024) working theories propose that human consciousness persists beyond bodily death and remains connected to the living, potentially through mechanisms such as epigenetic inheritance. He further suggests that consciousness may move between physical and non-physical dimensions and that unresolved injustices create intergenerational entanglements, in which descendants carry aspects of the deceased's unresolved fate. Within this framework, the body is viewed as capable of accessing and transmitting information from the quantum field. By identifying the origin of trauma and acknowledging these entanglements, healing is facilitated (Cohen, 2024). Constellations work interpolates the boundaries of contemporary psychology by confronting the metaphysical and transgenerational dimensions of consciousness.

Constellations as a Form of Active Imagination

C.G. Jung understood the vast dimensionality of the psyche after years of sustained engagement with a method he developed called Active Imagination. Defined as an "alert, wakeful confrontation with contents of the unconscious" Jung created this method during a particularly tumultuous period of his life (von Franz, 1998, p. 112). Between 1913 and 1932, his

practice of Active Imagination, particularly through writing the *Black Books*, documented his personal experiment in confronting unconscious material that emerged both from within and beyond him.

Active Imagination took Jung into unknown depths, standing in darkness confronting the unknown. He referred to this dimension as the land of the dead, which includes ancestors and repressed contents from the collective human psyche (Jung, 1989). Jung presented the crucial insight that “there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life” (Jung, 1989, p. 183). From this view, activated contents within the psyche transcend conscious control, so the work of psychology moves beyond management and regulation of undesirable thoughts, behaviors and emotional reactions into a reflective and active relationship with the depths that drive autonomous, unconscious material.

The implications of Jung’s position, that the psyche does indeed possess autonomy, reinforces our ethical responsibility toward deepened engagement with our inner life to attend to dimensions beyond our conscious awareness. In the wake of this recognition, two important questions arise, especially for western psychological consciousness: *What do we do with the dead?* and *what do they want from us?* FC offers both a starting point and a methodology to orient and work with the dead in the psyche that gives them a stage to play out the repressed, unresolved ancestral traumas that ails individuals and bring them to psychological treatment with a potentially collective impact.

In his clinical practice and personal reflections, Jung observed how the family system may exert a transgenerational impact on the individual. He also described feeling such dynamics in his own life, writing:

In some people one can detect a remarkable sense of shared destiny with their ancestors. I would express this in the idea of an impersonal karma that resides in the family and that

is passed on from father to son...I had a very strong feeling that I am affected by the unfulfilled aspects of my parents and grandparents and going even further back that I have to answer the questions that have presented themselves even then but received no answer at that time. (Jung, 2025 p. 228)

The development of Active Imagination by C.G. Jung has been interpreted by some scholars as reflecting his engagement with such personal and familial dynamics. From this perspective, his theoretical orientation may have been shaped, in part, by an attempt to work through inherited psychological tensions, contributing to his broader understanding of the unconscious.

FC can be understood as operationalizing principles that Jung explored through Active Imagination in his clinical practice. It offers an experiential framework for the exploration and engagement of the autonomous aspects of the unconscious moving through embodied representation. Jung described numerous applications of Active Imagination, including ritualized processes and dramatic reenactments (Chodorow, 1997). Swiss psychologist and scholar Marie-Louise von Franz, who collaborated directly with Jung, recounts that he once told her that “symbolic enactment with the body is more efficient than ‘ordinary active imagination’” highlighting the therapeutic potency of incorporating the body into analytic work, though he did not elaborate on this claim (Chodorow, 1997, p. 8). Jung’s recognition of the experiential dimension of Active Imagination could position FC as an embodied extension of this method where imagination and bodily representation merge to create a symbolic field whereby unconscious dynamics can be seen, represented and transmuted. In this way, both Active Imagination and FC initiates a therapeutic process that brings unconscious relational patterns to consciousness with promising therapeutic potential to initiate emotional catharsis.

Both Active Imagination and FC engage the psyche’s spontaneous image-making capacity, approaching images as living, dynamic presences. By entering into dialogue with emerging inner and imaginal figures, whether by representation in FC or dialogue in Jungian

Active Imagination, as Jung demonstrated in the *Black Books*, each method establishes a relational process by which unconscious material can be encountered and brought into conscious awareness through direct confrontation.

While both approaches submit to the source of images being directed by a greater force, the key difference is identifying who directs the images in the unfolding work. In Active Imagination the analysand, prescribes the images for themselves, engaging with material as it arises, thus suspending critical judgement to consciously attend to inner visions, dreams, emotions, or dialogues with autonomous internal figures, which are held by the psychoanalyst in a delicate, supportive process (Chodorow, 1997). In contrast, in FC, images originate from the facilitator with the representatives ultimately being responsible for tuning into their own imaginal, embodied representations in order to direct the seeker's intention on behalf of the family system. Hellinger described the mysterious process by which images emerged from within him to guide his facilitation:

When I don't know how I should proceed, I pull back into a realm of emptiness. My brain isn't working hard, in fact, quite the opposite. I pull back into the empty space and wait. Eventually, perhaps an image or an indication will come to me and I can begin again...I try something out according to the picture that has come up for me, and then I pull back again. I trust that something in the patient's soul will be set in motion. (Ulsamer, 2020, p. 38).

Hellinger's approach does not originate from the analytical reasoning, instead, it opens him up to an animating source within that communicates through images and is influenced by forces beyond him, including, but not limited to the client's soul. Central to his practice is the concept of "seeing," which Hellinger differs from intuition: it requires fully opening oneself to complex connections and allowing them "to work in me, to affect me" (Hellinger, 2000, p. 207). From this perspective, seeing transcends the intellect, enabling the practitioner to apprehend the whole person and their situation, and to facilitate a healing movement that emerges directly from the

movement of the image itself in real time. Thus, intimate engagement with embodied images becomes the cornerstone of Hellinger's approach.

Hellinger's work emphasizes the role of justice as a guiding principle for psychological healing and reconciliation. The family soul, a form of collective unconscious, retains the memory of "the dead", those who were excluded, ignored, and forgotten (Hellinger et al., 2000, p. 164). When trauma remains unacknowledged, later generations unconsciously compensate for the injustices of the dead by reenacting similar forms of affliction. In doing so, they recreate the unresolved dynamics of guilt, innocence and suffering embedded in the original experience, striving to restore balance to an invisible ledger of familial justice (Hellinger et al., 2000).

This may suggest that Active Imagination also works within the psyche to try to mediate systemic justice. Scholars do not shy away from the demands that Active Imagination generates on the individual. Marie-Louise von Franz (1998) recalls how Active Imagination asks for "such heavy demands on the integrity of the mediating individual" (p.117), suggesting that it inherently requires a moral position. While Active Imagination is most commonly practiced through journaling and artistic self-expression, Marie-Louise von Franz observes that many analysands become absorbed in the aesthetic dimension of creativity. She argues that Active Imagination extends beyond the pursuit of beauty, leading into an imperceptible dimension that demands an "ethical confrontation with (the psyche's) products... a moral attitude; it appears that this stage is not yet generally understood" (p. 118). This domain remains largely unexplored, functioning as a nascent frontier of consciousness that generates potential future possibilities, yet it has not been fully integrated into the ethical or moral frameworks that necessarily guide contemporary psychological understanding.

The unique dimension that Hellinger's approach offers is the guidelines for a prescription of an ethical and moral dimension inherent within his framework. He held phenomenological insight around the function of the conscience, that guided his group work and upheld a moral standard. Hellinger (2000) defined the conscience as:

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 consequence of being excluded from the system and assures our continued belonging to the system. (p. 207).

Hellinger's approach aims to restore balance in the collective psyche from historical injustices, reintegrating what has been excluded, and facilitating a healing movement that reestablishes harmony within the system. This process fosters renewed awareness of how the past continues to shape the present, while also influencing future relational dynamics. In contrast, Jung's method requires the individual to move beyond the limits of their existing psychic structure to seed a new ethic of consciousness. From this perspective, Active Imagination assumes a prophetic quality, where the wisdom of the soul emerges from the psyche from the future rather than working to resolve the past.

Conclusion

Bert Hellinger's work emerged in the aftermath of profound 20th century social upheaval, offering a transgenerational perspective that situates psychological suffering within broader relational and historical contexts. Drawing on diverse therapeutic traditions, his approach sought to move beyond purely cognitive models by engaging embodied and experiential processes. FC introduces a framework in which trauma may be understood not only within an individual's psyche, but also as an expression of unresolved dynamics within family and social systems.

Hellinger's wide ranging exposure to therapeutic modalities of his time, from psychoanalysis and family therapy to humanistic approaches, sought to engage the body as an instrument of perception and representation. His experiential model addresses forms of acute psychological suffering that emerge across generations, often expressed through intense somatic or psycho-spiritual symptoms. His work can be understood as contributing to a broader psychosomatic perspective, emphasizing the role of the body in expressing and perceiving relational dynamics. By working with groups, Hellinger situates the individual within a broader relational field, initiating experiential processes that challenge conventional explanations of suffering while rendering them both deeply personal and collectively resonant.

The continuing relevance of Hellinger's work lies in its engagement with questions that remain only partially addressed within contemporary science, including the nature and origins of consciousness. From this perspective, Hellinger's legacy FC invites the western psyche to consider the impact of the ancestral pull from the unconscious, suggesting that unresolved suffering may persist across generations within an individual until systemic justice is restored. The theoretical assumptions underlying FC, particularly those related to transgenerational transmission, phenomenological knowing, and metaphysical constructs, remain contested within mainstream psychological thought. While emerging research in areas such as epigenetics has renewed interest in intergenerational processes, the extent to which these findings support the claims of FC remains an open question requiring further empirical investigation.

Nevertheless, the contemporary use and continued growth of FC across cultures addresses experiential dimensions of psychological life that are not fully captured by existing clinical models. Hellinger's work invites scholars and practitioners to reconsider the ethical and psychological implications of intergenerational memory as it is embedded in the body and

psyche, suggesting that healing may require restoring balance not only within the individual but also across the wider relational systems that connect past with present generations.

References

- Berne, E. (1996). Principles of transactional analysis. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 38(3), 154–159.
- Blackwell, J. (2020). Family Constellation Training: Constellation Training Manual. In <http://healingfamilytrauma.com>
- Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Spark, G. M. (2013). *Invisible loyalties: Reciprocity in intergenerational family therapy*. Routledge.
- Chopra, D., & Kafatos, M. C. (2014). From Quanta to Qualia: How a Paradigm Shift Turns Into Science. *Philosophy Study*, 4(4). <https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5313/2014.04.005>
- Cohen, D. B. (2009). *I Carry Your Heart in My Heart: Family Constellations in Prison* (2nd ed.). Carl Auer International.
- Cohen, D. (2024). Family Constellation therapy: A nascent approach for working with non-local consciousness in a therapeutic container. *Progress in Biophysics & Molecular Biology*, 186, 33–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pbiomolbio.2023.11.008>
- Ellenberger, H. F. (1970). *The discovery of the unconscious: The history and evolution of dynamic psychiatry*. Basic Books.
- Everett L. Shostrom, & Psychological and Educational Films (Producers), & Shostrom, E. L. (Director). (2021). Frederick Perls and Gestalt Therapy. [Video/DVD] Psychological and Educational Films. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/frederick-perls-and-gestalt-therapy>
- Franco de Sá, R., Nogueira, J., & De Almeida Guerra, V. (2018). Traditional and complementary medicine as health promotion technology in Brazil. *Health Promotion International*, 34(S1), i74–i81. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/day087>

Freitas, F. M. de. (2023). *Family constellation as a consensual conflict solution method* (Vol. 3). *Scientific Journal of Applied Social and Clinical Science*.

<https://doi.org/10.22533/at.ed.216362313031>

Frymann, T. A. (2023). The Interbeing Identity Scale: Exploring the Integration of Our Fundamental Identity with All Other Beings, Nature, and the Cosmos. Columbia University. <https://doi.org/10.7916/v43y-jw80>

Gyimesi, J. (2022). Family constellation therapy in the context of esotericism. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 18(4), 749–761. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221120424>

Hellinger, B., Beaumont, H., & Weber, G. (2000). *Love's hidden symmetry: What makes love work in relationships*. Zeig, Tucker & Theisen.

Holtforth, M. G., & Grawe, K. (2003). Der Inkongruenzfragebogen (INK). *Zeitschrift Für Klinische Psychologie Und Psychotherapie*, 32(4), 315–323.

<https://doi.org/10.1026/0084-5345.32.4.315>

Hunger, C., Bornhäuser, A., Link, L., Schweitzer, J., & Weinhold, J. (2013). Improving Experience in Personal Social Systems through Family Constellation Seminars: Results of a Randomized Controlled Trial. *Family Process*, 53(2), 288–306.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12051>

Hellinger, B., & ten Hövel, G. (1999). *Acknowledging what is: Conversations with Bert Hellinger*. Zeig, Tucker & Theisen.

Jung, C. G. (1997). *Jung on active imagination* (J. Chodorow, Ed.). Princeton University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400866854>

Jung, C. G., & Jaffé, A. (1989). *Memories, dreams, reflections*. Vintage Books.

- Jung, C.G. & R F C Hull. (2024). *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 8: Structure & Dynamics of the Psyche*. Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C., Jung, C., Jaffé, A., Shamdasani, S. & Shamdasani, S. (2025). *Jung's Life and Work: Interviews for Memories, Dreams, Reflections with Aniela Jaffé*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1515/9780691266343>
- Konkolý Thege, B., Petroll, C., Rivas, C., & Scholtens, S. (2021). The Effectiveness of Family Constellation Therapy in Improving Mental Health: A Systematic Review. *Family Process*, 60(2), 409–423. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12636>
- Konkolý Thege, B., Somogy, B., & Sándor Szabó, G. (2022). The Effectiveness of Family Constellation Therapy in Reducing Psychopathological Symptoms in a Naturalistic Setting. *Psychiatria Danubina*, 34(3), 497–505. <https://doi.org/10.24869/psyd.2022.497>
- Lim, M., Carollo, A., Chen, S. H. A., & Esposito, G. (2021). *Surveying 80 years of psychodrama research: A scientometric review*. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, 780542. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.780542>
- Lutz, W. & Böhnke, J.R. (2008). Der Fragebogen zur Evaluation von Psychotherapieverläufen (FEP-2): Validierungen und Manual. *Trierer Psychologische Berichte*, 35, Heft 3.
- Miller, L. (2021). *The Awakened Brain : The Psychology of Spirituality and Our Search for Meaning*. Allen Lane.
- Moreno, J. L. (1941). *Foundations of sociometry: An introduction*. *Sociometry*, 4(1), 15–35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2785363>
- Moreno, Z. T., Blomkvist, L. D., & Rutzel, T. (2013). *Psychodrama, Surplus Reality and the Art of Healing*. Routledge.

Nerin, W. (2011). Family Reconstruction: The Masterpiece of Virginia Satir. In B. J. Brothers (Ed.), *Virginia Satir: Foundational Ideas* (pp. 103–118). Routledge.

OQ Measures. (2018). *OQ®-45.2 - OQ Measures*. OQ Measures.

<https://www.oqmeasures.com/oq-45-2/>

Pritzker, S. E., & Duncan, W. L. (2019). Technologies of the Social: Family Constellation Therapy and the Remodeling of Relational Selfhood in China and Mexico. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 43(3), 468–495. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-019-09632-x>

Reinert, M., Fritze, D., & Nguyen, T. (2024). The State of Mental Health in America 2024. In *University of Maryland Baltimore*. University of Maryland Baltimore. <https://archive.hshsl.umaryland.edu/bitstream/handle/10713/22688/2024-State-of-Mental-Health-in-America-Report.pdf>

Ruppert, F. (2022, May 17). *Why is our mother so important for us?* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0n9fW5-1os>

Sheldrake, R. (1988). *Presence of the Past, The: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature* (1st ed.). Times Books.

Smith, D. W. (2013). *Phenomenology*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>

Stjernswärd, S. (2021). *Getting to know the inner self: Exploratory study of identity oriented psychotrauma therapy—Experiences and value from multiple perspectives*. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, Article 526399. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.526399>

Stones, B. (2006). A Brief History of Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations. *Self & Society*, 33(4), 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2006.11086254>

- Talarczyk, M. (2011). Family Constellation Method of Bert Hellinger in the context of the Code of Ethics for Psychotherapists. *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy*, 13(3). Current Issue. <https://www.archivespp.pl/Family-Constellation-Method-of-Bert-Hellinger-in-the-context-of-the-Code-of-Ethics.153318.0.2.html>
- Torday, J. S. (2022). Consciousness, embodied Quantum Entanglement. *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pbiomolbio.2022.11.002>
- Torday, J., & Miller Jr., W. (2020). *Cellular-Molecular Mechanisms in Epigenetic Evolutionary Biology*. Springer Nature.
- Ulsamer, B. (2020). *The art and practice of family constellations: Leading family constellations as developed by Bert Hellinger*. Independently Published.
- Vandeveld, B. (2026, January). Family constellations therapy: Ethical and legal considerations [La thérapie par les constellations familiales : considérations déontologiques et légales]. Ordre des psychologues du Québec. <https://www.ordrepsy.qc.ca/web/ordre-des-psychologues-du-quebec/-/la-therapie-par-les-constellations-familiales-considerations-deontologiques-et-legales>
- Vicedo, M. (2009). *The father of ethology and the foster mother of ducks: Konrad Lorenz as expert on motherhood*. *Isis*, 100(2), 263–291. <https://doi.org/10.1086/599553>
- von Franz, M.-L. (1998). *The journey to the beyond* (Chapter V). In *C.G. Jung: His myth in our time* (pp. 99-121). Inner City Books.
- Walsh, R. T. G., Teo, T., & Baydala, A. (2014). *A critical history and philosophy of psychology : diversity of context, thought, and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wheeler, G., & Axelsson, L. (2015). *Gestalt therapy*. American Psychological Association.

Wolynn, M. (2016). *It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*. Penguin Books.

Yehuda, R., & Lehrner, A. (2018). Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: Putative role of epigenetic mechanisms. *World Psychiatry, 17*(3), 243–257.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20568>

Zhi, G., & Xiu, R. (2023). Quantum Theory of Consciousness. *Journal of Applied Mathematics and Physics, 11*(09), 2652–2670. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jamp.2023.119174>