

Gestalt and Systemic Constellation Work by Maria Dolenc

I began my training in Gestalt therapy around 28 years ago, when my “awakening” occurred following my dark and depressed times. Gestalt came to me as an unexpected gift, which made me realise that I was ready and willing to surrender to something bigger than my own struggles.

I loved my Gestalt training and the community around it. They provided me with the basic understanding and skills to be a therapist, even though when I began my training, my main intention was to work on myself.

I will always remember my trainer’s words to us: “If you came here to be a therapist then you can go home. But if you came here to do your own work and understand yourself better, then you may become a good therapist.” Her words really resonated with me and I knew then that it was the right thing for me to begin my Gestalt training.

After many years working as a Gestalt therapist and trainer I somehow felt that there was something missing for me. So, around 18 years ago I attended a Gestalt conference and someone presented a Family Constellation workshop. At the time I was a family therapist in the South Pacific Private Treatment Centre and I casually registered for the workshop.

I didn’t know anything about it. As the workshop progressed a woman was chosen to do her own constellation. She asked me if I would represent her in the constellation. Hesitantly I agreed, not knowing what it was all about, or what was expected of me as a representative.

When the facilitator asked me a few questions about what I was experiencing I was surprised how different I felt and I reported that. What was most interesting was that during the constellation I had a sense that this was really reflecting my own family dynamics and how I fit into all of this. My mind was literally “blown away” and I was left with the sense that I was dealing with a mystery that I didn’t understand or comprehend.

At the end of the workshop I went to the person whose constellation it was and said that I was sorry because I felt that I stole her constellation from her. She looked at me and said, “No, Maria you were so correct in what you were saying” and told me that it was exactly what was happening in her life. I was stunned. How could this be?

Well, after that I was hooked on constellation work and over the next years I went to any training that was available in Australia and overseas. It was the beginning of a beautiful journey.

Gestalt and Constellation work are in many ways very complimentary to each other. For starters, both Fritz Pearls and Hellinger, the creators of Gestalt and Constellation respectively come from Germany. In both modalities we are work-

ing from a Phenomenological stance allowing each situation to unfold in the way that it needs to for the client.

Also, both modalities work with the here and now, as well as what we call unfinished business. That relates to the concept of our past. However, sometimes in order to better understand ourselves, some of us at some stage will feel the call to explore our past in order to heal. In Constellation work we do that by bringing the past into the present and then integrating both. In Constellation, this enables the client to see a different point of view when they see their own constellation unfold.

In Gestalt we always look at polarities or opposite parts. When we work on polarities and disowned parts it becomes clear that there are hidden elements of ourselves and by doing chair work that may become visible and then assimilated into one being.

In Gestalt we apply PTOC, which stands for Paradoxical Theory of Change. To explain simply, it is based on a premise that a person changes when they allow themselves to be what they are at this moment in time. You first accept what is, and then change happens naturally. It is the same in Constellation work. When something becomes obvious and comes to awareness then the client will assimilate it into a new awareness and behaviour.

I remember that after my own constellation some years ago, I felt relieved and less inclined to change myself into something that I thought I should be. It was a humbling experience that it has stuck with me that I am part of the larger system rather than an individual trying to improve. It gave me humility and a greater understanding of my clients.

Some of the key differences between the two modalities is that during a Gestalt session, there is a client and therapist relationship. In contrast the therapist is not so important in Constellation work. The therapist is just a means of connecting the client to their family system and field. It makes sense that the relationship with the family is more important than the therapist. The therapist is just a facilitator in a sense and the client has the opportunity to see the bigger picture and how they fits into that picture.

Another notable difference is that Gestalt is more focussed on the individual whereas constellation work is more focussed on how the person is related to the family system and where the flow of love is blocked or entangled in past generations. By seeing the blockages and entanglements the client has an opportunity and choice to change their behaviour.

Constellation work is a very experimental and embodied experience. Gestalt works with dialogue between client and therapist whereas constellation work includes their family system and wider field of relationships.

When I began integrating Gestalt with Constellation work, I felt like the jigsaw puzzle became whole. It was like I could finally see a bigger picture, even though I didn't fully understand it. I came to understand my own self in relationship to my family and my ancestors. Before I knew about the impact of those before me but only intellectually. Through constellation work it becomes experiential and visible, so that we, as humans, can see what was not seen or understood before.

It was a natural progression for me to integrate both modalities, as I don't see them as separate or opposing. I like to say that they are like a tree with different branches but the same core. Gestalt offered me a solid base and Family Constellation has given me tools that I can use to work with clients in a more creative way and see from a greater perspective when looking at the system as a whole.

It is interesting to see how many Gestalt therapists are so eager to embrace Constellation work and then there are some who really have an aversion to it. I think that has to do with the way we each operate from a different personality structure. Being part of the Constellation community and coming across very well known Gestalt therapists who embrace Constellation work, encourages and inspires me to be part of the emergence of something fresh and new.

In my opinion, one of the biggest issues in constellation work is that many people come to workshops and have great experiences and then prematurely start working and conducting their own workshops. This is one area that troubles me when I see it. This work is very deep and healing and needs great comprehension, maturity, sensitivity, courage and experience before we can step out and do the work that is entrusted to us as facilitators. It is not always appropriate at a workshop to do a constellation for the client when they ask for it, sometimes different work may be more appropriate for them. That is when my Gestalt training, group work and experience is so important and necessary.

I have run over 100 workshops in Australia and have been teaching not only constellation work, but also teaching Trauma work and IROM for people who already finished at least one year of Family Constellation training.

I still like to attend workshops and training courses, because I love being with people who are real and open. It is still a mystery to me how it all connects. In constellation work I am at my best with my intuition and movements and able to stay present and aware.

I would like to express my gratitude to both Fritz Perls and Bert Hellinger, who were courageous enough to get out of their comfort zones and were able to attract so many of us to their work. Of course both have their own shadows, as we all do. They had a huge influence on the therapy field that we work in.

I have had the privilege to learn from many great teachers. Just to name a few: Dr. Ursula Franke, Guni Baxa, Albreth Mahr, Jakob Snider, Francesca Boring, Jan Jakob Stam, Bertold Ulsamer. Hellinger's books were of course very helpful and supportive in my early training. My learnings come mainly from clients and their

field. Then there are some teachers from whom I learnt how not to do constellations. They are also good teachers in their own way.

I often hear clients reporting amazing connections with others in the group after only one day of being together in a constellation workshop. They share their stories with the facilitator and other group members and connect with their own family system. I truly love how Constellation work connects people.

What touches me the most in Constellation work is the spirit of us all and how struggles and pain connect us all and are part of being human and vulnerable. We really are all in the same boat. When working with people with difficult fates I remain open-hearted knowing that I am no better than people who come to me for the service. I feel blessed and privileged to be doing this work.