

Working in the knowing field

John Harris explores family constellations and the unquantifiable phenomenon of surrogate perception



Family constellations is psychotherapy with an emphasis on using a different type of tool to access important information about the client and their family system. That tool is the surrogate perception of the representatives, as this article describes.

The general formula for a counselling session and a family constellation session is similar. A client brings an issue and time is spent clarifying and refining it, and the various techniques of each approach are used to work it through. Through both encounters, the core conditions of unconditional positive regard, congruence, empathy, and absence of judgment are usually present. However, there are also many things that are dissimilar.

A family constellation begins in a supportive and confidential group setting, with an individual presenting an issue that is investigated within the context of their wider family system. Group members (recruited and vetted by the facilitator) stand in for family members but they could also represent an abstract quality, like a country of origin or a family secret. The client or issue holder who has volunteered to work also chooses someone to represent them and, under the guidance of a facilitator, sets up and arranges the representatives spatially and relationally in the group space. One representative is set up at a time, in quick succession, and sometimes more are added in as the work progresses.

The setting up consists of the client standing behind a representative, placing his or her hands on their shoulders and gently moving them into a place that feels right in relation to the issue under consideration (with their consent). It is not unusual for a sibling who died young or a relative who disappeared in a shameful way to be represented, but there are many other possible roles. Usually, toward the end of the constellation, the client takes the position their representative formerly held. After the initial set-up, the facilitator waits and observes as the

phenomenon of surrogate perception comes into play.¹⁻³

Surrogate perception

In conventional therapy, the information provided by the client is critical and paramount to the session, as are the therapist's conjectures, interpretations and formulations.⁴ Family constellations differs in that, alongside contributions from the client and therapist, other crucial data come from what is known as the 'knowing field'.

Representatives are asked to allow any sensations, feelings, impulses and emotions to arrive and to report any such phenomena to the facilitator. Very often, astonishingly, the representatives are able to access accurate information about the people they are standing in for and, with this information, a new, formerly unseen, living map of systemic dynamics emerges.

According to Cohen,⁵ the perceptions of representatives are subjective and can contain components of personal projection, but this does not impair the process. It is normal for a broad cross-section of affective material to emerge, from intense emotion to numbness and indifference. Of great value, alongside the information about how the representatives feel, is the illumination of the relationships between them. This potent therapeutic resource, which blends individual affect with relational dynamics and is rich in unconscious material across generations from representatives for both the living and dead, was aptly named 'the knowing field' by physician and prominent family constellations facilitator Albrecht Mahr.¹

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The representatives also benefit by developing more trust in their own subjective experience, according to Naidu et al,⁶ who researched how a group of psychologists experienced being representatives. And Ruhl,⁷ who carried out similar research among non-professionals, observed that representatives felt an emotional release and healing as a result of their participation, even though the feelings originated elsewhere. Perhaps not surprisingly, research shows that emotionally attuned individuals find the process easier than the more cognitively inclined.⁵⁻⁷

Perceptual arenas

It is not unusual to hear workshop participants who have been representatives or clients, especially for the first time, describe the experience as powerful and exciting. Less common are descriptions of feeling uncomfortable or finding the experience difficult. Participants also report feeling safe, despite entering a realm of perception that is quite possibly beyond anything they have experienced before.^{6,7} For example, a young man may represent a great-grandfather or a middle-aged woman, or a family's spirit of stoicism that enabled them to get through a war. Although it may become necessary to 'de-role' a representative who has stood in for a system member with a heavy fate or intense suffering, this is unusual. Ulsamer² confirms that de-roling is only necessary in extreme cases, but nevertheless devotes time to explaining the process.

In our lives, outside of a family constellation workshop, we can easily transition in and out of our normal perceptual arenas. When watching a television programme or film, for instance, we might put ourselves in the position of a character, perhaps a victim or perpetrator, leave behind our prejudices and preconceived ideas for a brief moment and experience the character's perception, although, of course, some element of personal projection will be present. This could

also apply to a character in a book we are reading, and I have no doubt that the authors of novels, in an imaginative process, place themselves in the perceptive realm of their characters, leaving behind their usual experience of self.

Other therapeutic approaches also see instances of clients leaving behind their regular perceptual states and entering either those of others or possible future perceptual states of their own. Ulsamer² noted psychodramatist Grete Leutz's observations that spontaneous psychodramatic action in the role of a stranger can be so accurate as to be incomprehensible, given the total lack of knowledge of the role-player. Moreover, in Gestalt two-chair or empty-chair work, the essence of the technique is to move into the other person's perspective or a desired future perspective, and take on that role.⁸ Both these approaches seem to employ or display something like surrogate perception; however, it is not at the forefront of those therapeutic paradigms and questions are not asked about this shift of perceptive position. In contrast, the most asked question of family constellation facilitators is, how does the phenomenon of surrogate perception work?

Forces at work

The experience of having a personal issue constellated has been described as 'like a visit to a psychic under the sober auspices of therapy'.⁹ Which, indeed, raises the question, what forces are at work here? How can people with no knowledge of another's family give accurate representations of the feelings and perceptions of its members? Preiss¹ puts forward the possibility that quantum physics and mirror neurons are involved and reminds us that one of the most important discoveries in quantum physics is how the transfer of information takes place beyond space and time. Scientists who study the subject found that simultaneous reactions in different particles in multiple locations happened via the phenomenon of 'nonlocality'. In the



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case of mirror neurons, researchers concluded that humans only need to see a part of a picture to understand the complete picture. Mirror neurons help us to empathise, understand and trust others and could be involved in surrogate perception.¹⁰

Rupert Sheldrake's morphogenetic field theory is often cited as at least a partial explanation for surrogate perception. Sheldrake asserts that 'patterns of activity in the present resonate with similar patterns of activity in the past, through a connection across time'.¹¹ His theory does encompass the component parts of a family constellation - the past in terms of the origin of the presenting issue, and the present as manifested in the symptom. Indeed, these two come together and there is a resonance across time in

the form of material accessed by the representatives. However, no single scientific theory has offered a definitive explanation for surrogate perception and, given the almost unquantifiable nature of this highly subjective experience, probably never will. This raises the question of whether the experience of representatives in family constellations is better explained in non-scientific terms.

The shaman Daan van Kampenhout informs us that a representative's body acts as an anchoring point for the souls and spirits of others, and that the state of consciousness thereby encountered is typical of shamanistic practices.¹² This is a natural phenomenon in many indigenous traditions, whereby a person becomes a conduit for the essence of another.¹³ For transpersonal psychologists, the entire body is acting as a receiver, resonator and amplifier for information that has its origins outside of space and time as we generally perceive them in modern Western cultures.⁶ In the Western psyche there is an overemphasis on the rational, the logical, the intellectual and that which can be verified empirically. However, so far family constellations has not travelled well in the laboratory. In contrast, the feminine, with its focus on 'non-rational' elements, such as spirit, soul, heart, feeling and emotion, has been neglected in the modern world and, as a result, we have lost touch with non-linear perceptual states and other indigenous sensibilities.⁶ However, in family constellations workshops and seminars across the modern world, it's entirely normal for people to seamlessly transition to these archaic perceptual states, showing that they are not as dormant as one might expect and can be easily accessed.

Scientific inquiry

That family constellations don't represent veritable truths but, rather, energies present in a family system, is universally agreed by facilitators of the approach. For example, a constellation may reveal, through the representatives, a family member who has been

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excluded and is suffering as a result, or may demonstrate how a husband is drawn out of his marriage by an affair or even abuse. Therefore, it may well be that the best form of research into the arena of surrogate perception is personal experience. Anyone who encounters the phenomenon should carry out their own investigations and decide, based on their participation in family constellations, whether surrogate perception exists or not.

The experience of representing has numerous components, including being set up, perceiving bodily and other sensations, accessing feelings towards others in the field, the reordering of spatial positioning by the facilitator, and the uttering of healing sentences between the representatives, given by the facilitator. In other words, there is a lot to investigate, evaluate and come to some kind of decision about.

The 'father' of family constellations, German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger,¹⁴ describes wanting to understand and control the unknown as scientific inquiry and asserts that it is no use in this case. Instead, he advises pausing in our efforts to understand the unknown and instead 'allowing our attention to rest, not on the particulars, which we can define, but on the greater whole'. He calls this stance 'phenomenological', and it pervades his writings and teachings.

Scientific research into surrogate perception has not made any great progress, although Sheldrake's theory

of morphic resonance - which holds that 'things behave as they do because they remember what they did in the past'¹⁵ - helps. So does Sheldrake's idea that information in the form of memory can be accessed by someone other than the owner.¹⁵ Indigenous wisdom traditions do better at explaining the process of surrogate perception, as does transpersonal psychology, with its emphasis on subtle energy fields and transcendent aspects of human experience.

For those who experience standing in a constellation, representing someone or something, the process is simply accessed - no experience or expertise is necessary, and there are personal benefits to be had.⁷ It is this aspect of family constellations that sets it aside from other psychotherapeutic approaches. The 'field resonance' that representatives experience is a trusted ally of the facilitator and is treated with great respect at all times. It is a process that can soften, align, teach, enlighten, challenge, change, inform and gently deconstruct a bias or judgment held by the representative. In my opinion, the best way to evaluate this phenomenon is personal experience. ■



About the author

John Harris has worked as a counsellor, therapist, supervisor and trainer for more than 25 years in both New Zealand and the UK. He has led family constellations workshops at a variety of locations, including the Esalen Institute in California and Skyros in Greece. He currently lives in Eastbourne with his wife and son and has a private practice in London and East Sussex. www.livingmaps.co.uk

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