

## **Constellations and Gestalt: a closer look -- Gordon Wheeler**

(**chapter draft** -- please do not copy! – final editing is available as the Afterword in Hausner, Stephan, 2011, *Even If It Costs Me My Life*; NY/Santa Cruz CA: GestaltPress/Routledge Taylor & Francis)

Systemic or Family Constellations is a term apparently first used by Adler to refer to the embeddedness of the individual in immediate social systems of belonging. As a current methodology “Constellations”<sup>1</sup> is an approach developed over the past thirty or more years, originally by Bert Hellinger, drawing on a variety of sources ranging from ancestral rituals of the Zulu people (where Hellinger spent some years in missionary work) to Gestalt and TA, and particularly the Gestalt-inflected family systems and “family reconstruction” work developed by Virginia Satir and popularized at Esalen and elsewhere from the 60’s through the 80’s. From Satir Hellinger seems to take particularly the ideas of “basic human validation” through the primary family constellation triad, and of course the signature Satir insight that the “presenting problem” is generally best regarded not as the “real” problem, but as people’s systemically determined way of dealing with the “real problem,” which will likely involve a misalignment or transactional failure in the basic human validation process.

Now Hellinger certainly acknowledges Gestalt influence (personal communication), and many or most leading practitioners of his work have had extensive exposure to Gestalt training. Moreover, the whole notion that the “symptom” is or was itself, in Goodman’s felicitous phrase, a “creative adjustment,” is an idea that derives at least

---

<sup>1</sup> The terms “Family Constellations,” “Orders of Love,” just “Constellations” and more recently “Systemic Constellations,” also “Systems Constellations,” have often been used interchangeably over the past several decades, though we can trace a rough generational shift over this time, with the second generation of practitioners, most of them some decades younger than Hellinger himself, may tend to use the latter terms over the former. This particularly marks the work of the group around Hunter Beaumont and his students and colleagues in the International Systemic Constellations Association.

implicitly from Freud (Hellinger, like Perls, was a trained psychoanalyst), and then was given a good deal more elaboration by Anna Freud (the “mechanisms of defense,” (1938) and then further by Satir ( ) as well as others, well before Goodman (following Rank) added his signature emphasis on the creative, life-situational problem-solving aspect of what to the Freuds was still basically a “defense” against eruptive Id-material.

But arguably this concept receives its fullest, most articulated development in Gestalt, where it has the status of a fundamental principle, at least from Lewin (19 ) forward. After all, the idea of taking a systemic view of people’s “lifespace” – that is, a perspective that treats their felt, subjective worlds as an interactive web of felt “forces” or pulls – is a whole way of thinking that comes straight from Lewin, who in this as in many other ways remains the most fruitful and influential single founder and source of a Gestalt perspective and understanding (see eg 19 ). (Lewin is of course recognized as well as a or the major founder of group dynamics, organizational psychology, and the broad field of social psychology as well. *His* signature insight in this area, “The need organizes the field,” is a summation of his perspective in this area, which is a founding idea of motivational and ego psychology [see Marrow, 1964 for discussion]. But Lewin was still putting much more emphasis on “needs” and intentions that are in the subject’s conscious awareness; Goodman, by contrast, is much more attuned to the more Freudian-inflected idea of pulls and drives that are out of awareness, or “unconscious.” Thus both these traditions – the organizing power of conscious intention, and the often countervailing or subversive dynamic of out-of-awareness desires and pulls, are deep in our Gestalt legacy, which is hospitable to the complex dynamic of both these “organizers” of behavior and experience).

And indeed, in Gestalt, nothing is more common than the idea that some basic determinants of our behavior and experience are out of our normal awareness, and that much of intervention and restoration of capacity and health lies in bringing those

connections and dynamics to light, so that our experience can become richer, more choiceful, more complex. Familiar examples would range all the way from the idea that my out-of-awareness clinched fist as I talk about, say, my older sibling, is a clue to some powerful organizing emotions in that relationship, to the common experience that some inner voice or “should” that has been directing and maybe constricting my experience and behavior, is actually linked to some important childhood figure. Once that link and “valence dynamic” (to use a Lewinesque language) is brought to awareness, with all the associated feelings and meanings and new connections that may flow from that, then I have a different picture of the attachments, “pulls,” and “pushes” that have gone into the construction of what may have been a basic, out-of-awareness, and formative pattern of behavior and relationship in important parts of my life. And not just a new picture (and this is the very essence of Gestalt): once the elements are “lifted out” of their usual, firmly-integrated and embedded context and neural linkages like that, then there is the opportunity for a more supported encounter with difficult aspects of that familiar, integrated “picture,” and the chance to actually experiment with new combinations of these dynamic elements and feelings, in the service of a new integration more supportive to new creative living.

Now if you’re familiar with Constellations work, you may be thinking that the above description of some aspects of Gestalt work might just as well be a description of Constellations work itself; and of course I’ve couched it in those terms intentionally, with emphases on aspects of both models that can easily be seen to be structurally and methodologically parallel. Still, it would seem from all these lineages, sources, and considerations that a basic harmony, or parallelism of ideas at least, between Gestalt thinking and Systemic Constellations approaches would be a natural assumption and outcome. And yet – we know that the picture of contacts and cross-currents between the two broad streams, Gestalt and Constellations, has been much muddier than that, in some quarters conflictual, even at times reactively vitriolical. Why?

I think there are two basic reasons or issues behind this widely (by no means universally) held presumption of there somehow being a fundamental incompatibility, a basic contradiction between these two models. One – the simpler and less significant issue – lies no doubt in some of the provocative manner or positions that Bert Hellinger himself (in common with some other pioneering founders of methods) may have seemed to display. Certainly his own style of working may have seemed directive and “expert-based” to an authoritative (some would say authoritarian) degree at times; and his seeming insistence that current generations must not form any negative judgments about their forebears can seem to go to troubling (to me) extremes, and might lend itself to being twisted by others into a stance of apology for family or wider-arena abuses and atrocities.

To be sure, we can readily grant, I think, that the whole business of judging/blaming one’s parents and others from the past can be a trap, a dead end developmentally, and can function itself as a kind of symptom of unmourned grief and loss which goes nowhere as long as it stays frozen in an unaware, blaming, and victimized form. Still, where a parent or other caretaking person has committed terrible abuses or atrocities (toward the client or others), a doctrine that may seem to rest on “to understand all is to forgive all” strikes me as inadequate and reductive, a kind of collapse into a defensive form of relativism that is as shallow and paralyzing as the opposite extreme (ie, the kind of avoidant, self-aggrandizing judgmentalism Hellinger is manifestly intent on steering us away from). To me, it sits much better to say, more modestly, that “to understand all,” and thus to begin to know more about the *systemic context* of evil or harmful acts, *complexifies* the picture, in a disturbing, challenging way, which is at least potentially healthy and life-affirming. It doesn’t simplify things – or it shouldn’t and needn’t: rather, it shakes them up, breaking up a more familiar, perhaps simplistic (and often projective) “good/evil” dichotomy, into a perspective from which we can condemn acts and choices, without necessarily clinging to the fragile superiority of defensive certainty

that we would have acted much more courageously and nobly ourselves.

And from there a new, more complex picture (of the “perpetrator,” the “victim” -- who is so often also a victim him/herself, -- and their contextual relationship to each other, in a larger overall context) then requires *additional support* to become organized in a more supportive, more freeing and life-promoting gestalt. (And here again, the idea is to achieve this without falling into the other, rather polar opposite oversimplification of “everything is relative,” so we “can’t form any judgments”). Plainly (again, to me) there are risks and traps here, methodologically, at both extremes: ie, the “no-judgment” extreme (except of course that harsh judgment about making any judgments!), completely relativizing our ethical intuitions – and the other extreme of defensive or draining focus on judgment of others, bereft of context.

Now new systemic pictures of taking in and understanding one’s own developmental context and self-story are part of the manifest goal of Constellations work – as they certainly are of Gestalt work in general. In both cases, in accordance with basic Gestalt principles of experiential organization, intervention is meant to support *deconstruction* of an established pattern (of understanding, or self-narrative), in favor of reintegration of a new pattern, a new gestalt “ground” more supportive of creative life and growth. Personal growth always means *greater complexification of experience* – which is to say, of “ground.” In general this more complex picture emerges out of a clearer, better-supported focus of strengthened (more vivid), clarified and simplified elements (a familiar example is the exploration and support of embodied sensation, another common theme and tool common to both approaches). But the heightening of particular elements of experience is not just for its own sake: rather, it is always in the service of a new, more complex integration/gestalt. We heighten figural attention, in order to disorganize ground, in the service of some new emergent organization which may include more dynamic elements, more open to life, learning, and creative response.

Greater complexity in turn always requires greater support, including the support of *time*; and it is here in particular that an intervention strategy that may look (to me) like facilitator rushing, like prescribing, and even possibly like shaming for “resistance” to a new systemic picture – all of these being behaviors I’ve seen in the hands of some practitioners of Systemic Constellations, including in my experience Hellinger himself (and some Gestaltists, of course!).

Finally, on the related question of political activism, of energy for change. Here too, the business of judging or not judging the past, or one’s own forebears, is a tricky felt field, not easily reduced to slogans and directive solutions (forebears such as Freud, or Perls, or certainly Jung or Heidegger for examples -- or one’s own parents, for that matter, -- all of whom may *or may not* have been always “doing the best they could under the given circumstances”). In the same way I may look back on events and actions in my own life and feel, no, really, I actually had available room and support to do this or that thing a little better, hold this or that commitment more fully and generously, in terms of a value system important *to me and my group of ethical reference*, than I in fact did do. In cases like that it is crucial to me, in my own understanding of psycho-spiritual growth, my own and others’, to hold that image/memory with regret, not *only* with “self-forgiveness.” This is a point I will come back to at the end of this essay.

Let’s note for now the common and instructive Buddhist formulation, the two cardinal principles for right living are compassion and judgment. But – and here’s the key formulation, that brings these principles to the level of felt living: neither of these principles is any use without the other. Judgment without compassion is cold, dead, and ultimately isolates you in a small room – a frozen gestalt. On the other hand, compassion without judgment is no guide to action. In our Gestalt terms, it oversimplifies the experiential field, which doesn’t serve richer living and growth. Speaking personally, my experiences of Hellinger the teacher, in books, in personal

demonstrations, and in personal conversation, have left me with gratitude for some brilliant contributions – but also with uncomfortable sensations and reflections of both these possible extremes. On the one hand, a sort of heavy hand of prescriptive compassion-without-judgment, for the clients, and at the same time some of the opposite extreme toward those who take different positions on the work itself.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most useful admonition in this complex area, to me, comes from my own spiritual teacher, who was given to saying to people who came to him troubled by their own judgmentalism and righteousness, something like: “that’s terrible. You must never be judgmental, it will poison you. Righteousness is violent – you must give it up at once. But – (and here came the trademark twinkle) – don’t give up *judgment*, don’t give up being *right!*”

From all this I take: hold it lightly. Certainly the Constellations tradition, in some hands (again, like the Gestalt tradition and many others) may be fairly taxed with sometimes not *holding lightly* these delicate, important, and complex tissues of people’s lives, and how to address ourselves most effectively to the suffering of the world.

Now, all that goes to the first and speedier problem to deal with, Hellinger’s personal style and sometimes rigid pronouncements and provocations -- at least for today’s generation of Gestaltists, many of us in some reaction to some of the Gestaltists we knew in an earlier generation as well (and/or to ourselves, in earlier, more righteous years....). But what about the second problem referenced above? This is the meatier question of theory, and theoretical compatibility – which goes back, in this case as always, to fundamental assumptions and principles that each of these two approaches rests on. Let’s look at each of those in turn, starting with Gestalt.

---

<sup>2</sup> I want to emphasize that these are my personal experiences. Others I know and respect, who have had vastly more direct contact with the teacher and the man, sometimes report some of these discomforts as well as a whole larger, richer contextual picture. I do feel personally indebted to Hellinger, again, for his insistence that judging one’s forebears can easily become a trap and a developmental dead end.

## Gestalt – a deeper look

Gestalt, in the broadest and deepest formulation, is a system of thought for understanding the *construction of human experience*. This formulation is pithy, and may at the same time seem obvious; but it is also dense, and calls for some unpacking. What do we mean by “experience;” what goes into this “construction;” and then why is all that the most relevant and productive focus for our attention in understanding and working with people?

We begin with the most fundamental Gestalt insight, the one that all the others come from and rest on: *our experience is in fact something that is constructed*, not “found.” It doesn’t come to us whole, or even in whole chunks, from the outside; it isn’t “given” in the “environmental stimuli,” however those are understood. It doesn’t just happen “to us.” These “gestalts,” or meaningful wholes of experience we’re always talking about in our model (and in life), are not just “found” in nature: most of the significant “units” of perception, narration, understanding are themselves the product of complex interpretive, evaluative processes.

It was the founding insight of our model that we actively perform and participate in these constructive processes. We don’t “receive” pictures or coherent narratives of “reality;” we don’t even “take in” clear usable perceptions of an object in a passive way (Lewin again: “All perception is a form of problem-solving” [Marrow 1964]). What we do is something much more active, more personally engaged than that: we take some emergent amalgam of “what’s out there” (photons, energy waves and the like, to draw on the current scientific constructs of what’s physically “there”), what we know and expect, what we believe and want, what we feel and wish for and fear, what the context is as we understand/ construct it (the “same” gesture by you – say, bumping against me with your body – has an entirely different import and meaning, depending on my understanding/construction of context, including centrally your motivation, as imagined by me!), where we’re “trying to get to,” our map of ourselves and others into a social



system of reference, etc etc etc – we take all this, and synthesize it, much more rapidly than it takes to even begin to tell it here, into a “meaningful whole picture” or sequence. And “meaningful” here just means “something I can use,” “something I can fit in and do something with” – even if that “doing something” is just “find out more,” or even “get the hell out of here fast.”

All this kind of thing was the subject matter, and the rich product, of the first half century, say, of Gestalt lab and social group research, led by the founding generation, followed by Lewin, Goldstein, and their students (including Perls), and on to the long academic research careers of Ogden, Gibson, and others in American universities. As a result, the broad field of psychology was revolutionized and transformed, to the point where today there really is no significant psychology in research or theory which is not fundamentally Gestalt in its assumptions and most basic models (and this ranges over and includes contemporary Behaviorist, depth, and cognitive neuroscience branches of the field). And then of course the application of these ideas to therapy, groups, community work, organizational dynamics, coaching, and so on has been the multi-focus of the next half century or so of Gestalt therapy and other Gestalt-derived applications to human systems and problems (eg, the pioneering NTL Institute for training organizational consultants and managers, which grew directly out of Lewin’s work some 60 years ago, at the same time as Goodman and Perls were developing applications of Gestalt to psychotherapy and personal growth as a life practice).<sup>3</sup>

These insights, which underlie and have utterly transformed the field of psychology over the past century, rest --as does the seminal work of Nietzsche, Freud, Husserl, James, Dewey, Kropotkin, Lewin himself, and most or all of the other pioneering

---

<sup>3</sup> Goodman and Perls were not the first, of course, to relate Gestalt ideas to clinical and “real-life” applications. Lewin’s work with “lifespace” and then with living process groups and work groups; Koffka’s work on child development, pathology, and health; Wertheimer’s work with questions of values; and of course Goldstein’s and other’s work with brain function, brain damage, therapy and recovery, just to note a few directions, sketched and partly developed applications in these same directions.

forebears who are variously integrated into the pragmatist, phenomenological, existentialist, depth-psychology, and social/developmental psychology of our Gestalt tradition – on the foundational challenge of Darwin. That is, Darwin’s work throws us back, and threw all the above thinkers back, on the question of human nature. If we are adapted to some evolutionary niche, like all life forms, then what is that niche, and what is the nature of that adaptation? You can see this clear survival/evolutionary flavor in Gestalt in our special “take” on the questions of experience, emotion, behavior, meaning, and so forth: we speak easily and naturally of “creative adjustment,” “bio/social/ psychological” nature, *dealing* with a situation, *responding* to something, *coping* with things, integrating a “usable whole of experience,” or in Goodman’s intentionally homely phrase, “getting along in the world.”

What is that relevant “world,” for human beings, and what is our particular species adaptation, our human nature and process which Gestalt set out to investigate in a whole new way, based in much more lifelike “situational challenge” kinds of lab methodology – with such stunning and lasting effects?

The answer, emergent now from the past twenty years to brain/mind research, anthropology and cultural studies, biology and DNA studies, and evolutionary theory and research: *human are evolved, basically, to deal with social complexity*. This insight, which reverses and transforms a century and a half of evolutionary speculation, underpins everything in our Gestalt model (and for that matter in Systemic Constellations) at the most fundamental level.

That is, our hallmark species adaptation is to be able to comprehend, handle hold, integrate, evaluate, choose, compare, plan, and otherwise handle shifting constellations of complex social group interactions to a literally unimaginable degree of complex functional integration (where “complex integration” the survival/adaptation strategy of our species, means the [relatively, ultimately] harmonious interaction of diverse and

variable parts).<sup>4</sup>

In other words, we are evolved for creativity. Our need for this enormous creative capacity is driven by our species need for an ability to sense, estimate, evaluate, reorganize, fit in with, influence, use, draw on, negotiate with, and strategize (both with and at times against) a social group. If you think about it, this is why you find human all over the earth, in the most variable physical environments imaginable, while our closest relations, who share roughly 99% of our genes and a more rudimentary form of our social/organizational capacity, are restricted to one particular physical environment: because our evolutionary “econiche” is not a physical environment, directly. Our evolutionary species niche is the social group; and that niche is “portable,” it travels with us.

What this means is that our two hallmark species characteristics -- seemingly limitless creative capacity, and a unique species ability for social complexity, -- are actually one and the same capacity. Our brains are evolved to handle, evaluate, imagine, compare, and resolve practically this endlessly shifting, urgently important social scene we find ourselves in; and the creative flexibility that has demanded of us, over the past million years in particular, has also created our unique creative gift.

We are evolved to imagine and compare “scenarios” – integrated whole pictures of a shifting social strategy to deal with an equally shifting survival situation, of maximal interdependency. To do this we have evolved a frontal cortex – roughly quadrupled in

---

<sup>4</sup> And when we say “unimaginable,” it really is a literal truth. If you take the number of individual members of what appears to be the modal, natural human social unit – which clusters around about 150, -- and then factor out the total number of possible combinations of all size and variety of sub-groups of that number, the result is a number greater than the total number of particles in the known universe. But – the number is roughly comparable to the number of neuronal *connections* in the human brain. This arresting factoid gives some idea of the biological underpinnings of our capacity for integrated connectivity, which after all is our essential survival strategy, as an individually defenseless, enormously long/dependent childhood, and thus social-group-dependent animal in the open savannah.

And this number of possible combinations still does not take into account the fact that each human subgroup has a different “meaning,” survival-wise, when organized for a different purpose.

size over the brief evolutionary timespan of a couple of million years – which, significantly, is not connected directly to the “outside world.” Rather, the frontal cortex is the brain region devoted to integrating and synthesizing signal activation from other brain centers, themselves connected to “internal” and “external” sensory/electric signals. Every moment, every selected integrated image of a felt/perceived situation, is a new situation, phenomenologically speaking, a new “scenario” (which is a perceived situation in relation to some felt need or intention, a “dealing with” some other integrated perception).<sup>5</sup>

The Gestalt research tradition has been central and key to the elaboration of this emergent picture, integrating evolutionary research with our current understanding of the brain. In this picture, novelty and learning take the place of ecostability and instinct in other, more creatively limited animals. We aren’t born with many instincts (ie, long behavioral sequences triggered in entirety by presentation of the initial stimulus event, at least in a given sort of background). Rather, we construct those sequences, those tightly integrated long chains of behavior, feeling, and evaluation, based on learned, constructed patterns that are formed, relationally, after birth. This is why it is that cultures can differ so vastly for humans, in a species that nevertheless remains fully interbreeding, essentially genetically identical across groups (allowing for mostly minor haploid variability on particular genes in isolated populations). It is also why basic

---

Lewin again: “The need [ie, the intent] organizes the field [ie, the practically relevant social situation at the moment].

<sup>5</sup> And note here how this emergent picture is of a brain which is inherently *syntactic* — because social complexity is syntactic. That is, the hallmark of social complexity is that the significance of an individual element – in this case an individual group member – is given not by that person’s characteristics per se, but rather by the nature of the whole scenario, the particular situation and intentional activity, in which the person is being regarded at the moment. This is the definition of syntax: a meaningful (language) whole where the meaning of individual elements cannot be understood out of a given, unique, and variable context (eg of a sentence). Thus the second great mystery of human evolution – Where did language erupt from, so discontinuously? – is also much clarified by this perspective of a brain driven by the demands of social complexity. That is, the emergence of *syntactic* (as opposed to just signaling) *language* took place in/out of a brain that was *already* complexly

cultural differences can have an almost biological force, enormously resistant to change: because many of them they are laid down, in relational interaction, in the actual physical organization of the infant brain, which is born premature, unorganized, and completely dependent – and utterly adapted to respond to, encourage, and integrate the interaction with lifegiving caretakers through a long period of complete dependency. Again, basic interactional and self-organizational patternings in the brain, which take the place in humans of instincts in other species, are *constructed*, interactively, after birth. This construction, our basic “Gestalt act,” is what we know as learning – and it is utterly socially mediated.

The result is clusters of sequences, comprising memories, feelings, beliefs, evaluations, estimations, interpretations, needs, etc – ie, *gestalts of intention* – which can be very tightly organized, quite resistant to change, and very pattern-setting (or “ground”) for other sequences and patterns. These sequences keep getting formed all through life: this is what we call learning. And they can be modified and recomposed with new experience: this is what we call “plasticity.” And together with the sense of what these learnings “feel like,” and our reflections on them, this is what we know as experience. *Experience*, in our Gestalt understanding, is *whole integrated, interpretive clusters of meaning* (by which mean predictive useability, potentially, in scenario planning), or “gestalts,” which include sensation, emotion, action, memory, belief, estimation, evaluation, and so forth.

And *it is experience* – meaningful wholes of action/interpretation/ understanding/prediction/feeling – *which mediates behavior*. Not the “stimulus” leads to the response: rather, our experience of the stimulus, *interpretation* of the “stimulus” event, preselected in a context, given particular intentions, people, and conditions, yields the behavioral outcome, the resultant action (overt or “internal,” as thought).

---

syntactic, to deal with social relations. Again, the two hallmark characteristics of our species – social complexity and creative/linguistic ability – are essentially one and the same.

This is the essence of the Gestalt revolution of the earlier, behaviorist/objectivist understanding of behavior and where it comes from. Not “stimulus-response,” as in many other species: “stimulus (selected, interpreted)-experience (integration of meaning, predictive evaluation)-response,” is our human process sequence.

Now, in our Gestalt understanding (which is the essential basis for brain/mind models today), this both poses and “solves” a particular kind of problem, which is the problem posed by creativity itself – our capacity to respond variably and survivably to novel situations. This problem lies in the fact that novelty, uncatalogued and processed, would pretty much instantly lead to a cacophonous clog of variability, soon overwhelming the finite capacity of our cortex, in the face of the potentially infinite variability of the world. To be sure, we select, we attend to only parts, we use only a limited band of sensory response capability in the first place (we have no awareness of, say, gamma rays – though certainly they will affect us). How do we deal with overwhelm, if we don’t have a pre-fixed register of instincts to limit and stabilize us?

The answer is sketched above: we rely on our capacity to create new “instinct-like” long behavioral chains, continuously and creatively, throughout life. To use today’s cybernetic imagery, we have a limited amount of “short term memory” available at any time – and we constantly have to “clear the decks” by integrating the new solution to the novel situation, into newly-created and preexisting patterns, or neural/behavioral change, in the brain.

The *generation of experience* – problem-solving, learning, creativity – is thus constantly being resolved, more or less, *into automisms*: habits new and old, which themselves contextualize other habits and automisms in memory patterns (both “conscious” and “unconscious.” Behaviorists, working to accommodate these ideas, sometimes call these sequence/clusters by the useful name of schemas – complex integrations of behavior, thought, belief, feeling, and meaning (which again means estimation, evaluative predictability, the key to our species survival).

Living is constructive, integrative, synthetic. Novelty synthesized into habit, in the longest chains practicable under the circumstances. In the familiar example, without this constant relegating of the new into the familiar, the novel into the long habit chain, we couldn't walk. And – we couldn't do anything else while walking (as indeed we mostly cannot: while learning a new skill, we can generally only perform those other skills which are fully, deeply, and very stably already integrated into habit patterns of their own. This is true of physical/mental skills, like skiing or playing the piano, obviously. And it is all the more true of those life-giving complex social skills we need for living well and growing in our special econiche, of *other human beings* (think of things like arguing a point without failing to listen at the same time; remembering to attend to body and emotion while focusing on a difficult patient or partner or boss, say; rapidly estimating a number of people's availability and fitness for particular roles in an urgent situation, while still focusing on the aim you're trying to accomplish or solve, which may most often itself be a complex social goal, and so on).

Living is constructive, synthetic, meaning-generating. And automism-dependent, and new-automism-generating. For this reason, therapy, in a Gestalt understanding, is deconstructive. All our Gestalt practices, intervention skills, and techniques, are basically in the service of taking these tightly integrated sequences of feeling, action, understanding/meaning and belief, and adding the special supports to create safety, relaxation, relief from immediate time pressure, so that we can lift out the various elements of these tightly integrated neural chains, heighten and examine them, question and set them back "in motion," bring them into contact with other elements and feelings and beliefs – all in the service of facilitating a newer, potentially better integration of elements, which then can become a new neural pattern, serving to platform new learnings, newer, hopefully richer solutions to the next novel creative challenge of living. (And "better," here, means in the direction of greater complexity, the integration of more dimensions of complex awareness – thought, feeling, intention,

memory, scanning, belief, and so forth).

The more these established patterns which we are deconstructing are the residue of early learnings, socially driven, and especially the ones formed under urgent conditions of high need and low support – the more the solutions themselves, while theoretically the best possible “creative adaptation” we could achieve under those given, low-support circumstances, will tend to be rigid, not very open to new learnings and enrichment, not very complex – and in need of more of the very special supports of longer-term, deeply safe psychotherapy and other relational processes. Not for nothing did Goodman call these special learning situations, permitting of deep deconstruction of tight structures of experiential and neuronal ground, “safe emergencies.”

Now, we’ve gone to some length here to sketch out our evolutionary heritage and nature, leading to our gestalt-forming, integrative/ evaluative human process and behavior, and needing special supports for the deconstruction of old, dysfunctional, and change-resistant “habits of ground.” This is Gestalt. In the process we’ve sketched an animal, ourselves, that on the basis of 200 million years of mammalian evolution for attachment and dependency, some 60-80 million years of primate evolution for social group living, perhaps 20 million years of “great ape” specialization – has progressively and irregularly grown more and more complexly integrated in social living and capacity, and more and more dependent on the complex, integrated social group.

This picture changes a number of things. It takes a good deal of the sexist perspective out of human anthropology and evolutionary theory, for one thing. No longer do we see Man-the-Hunter and Alpha-Male theories being offered in explanation of the rapid growth of the brain, and thus the establishment of our basic nature. Rather, understanding as we now do that the demands of social complexity drove the explosive growth of the brain, we know that female evolution, if anything, is at least the equal of the push for creativity in males. We also understand both the potential and the evolutionary use of our enormously long, dependent childhood: it is in this period that



our brain, born severely premature and unformed, takes on organization into neural patterns and pathways; and that process is regulated, stimulated, structured, and mediated by relationship, primarily between infant and (multiple) caretaker(s) (see Hrdy, 2009). We're born to sense and deal with social relations; we live and grow through growth in our capacity to sense and manipulate social situations; we are and remain exquisitely sensitive to the complexities of our social surround at virtually every moment of life. It's how our creativity arose and works. It's how learning and memory function, through elaborate integration of mammalian emotional centers with the attentional and other memory structures and processes of the brain. And it's how and why therapy works: our deepest patterns are those holistic constructions that were supported in our early social interactions. We add support, to permit relaxation, relative deactivation, and deconstruction/reconstruction of those patterns now – in therapy, in ongoing or special relationships, and in the socially-mediated business of living.

### Constellations - a deeper look

We know far more than we know how to say. This is true in so many areas – physically, artistically, spiritually, and more. And it is nowhere more true than in our basic human-nature-generating situation, which is the *close social group*.

All of us are aware of this, in many different ways. To take a familiar example, we all know the experience of walking into a room, being taken by surprise by the “atmosphere” or “vibe,” – and then either just automatically “sensing what’s up,” or else being aware of not knowing – but knowing that something definitely is “up.” “What’s going on,” we may say – if conditions of present estimated safety and sensitivity, and past experiences of social acceptance, permit such a direct attack. Or, we may opt of “keep our own counsel,” perhaps sensing hair rising on the back of our neck (an ancient mammalian physical response, to perceived yet not-yet-known danger,

or the ambiguity of sensing tension in others. *We know groups.* (We'd better – our species evolution as well as our personal survival pretty much depended on it). We may have learned to ignore this capacity, or to stifle it, or we may never have developed it very fully in the first place (because it was either not fostered in our original social environment, or perhaps it was actively taboo). But it is the cornerstone of our ability to, again in Goodman's phrase, "get along in the world."

When we do this, this "sensing" of the social grouping we're in, we're drawing on something that is not only evolutionarily ancient, but personally, developmentally preverbal as well. As infants and children, we "know" this social surround directly, "intuitively" as we say. Is our world relaxed or tense, stable or jumpy, "mappable" or confounding, defying attempts to make sense (in which case we may give up on the idea and feeling of being able to "make sense of our world," a potentially crippling effect. We now know, for example, that infants don't just "take in" and imitate behaviors: they imitate intent. They respond – as we do, and all primates and many other mammals do – to strong affect. Anger tends to spark anger – our our learned "defenses" against it; sadness the same; joy, humor, sexual excitement, grief, extreme embarrassment or shame – all these states, when strong in one person, are immediately communicated, in a direct embodied way, to the people around us.

We know all this and so much more. And unquestionably, we react to this "data," these felt, embodied senses of the particular social group we're in at the moment. In general, the more salient the group is to us, but more our membership "matters," the more acutely we will tend to be affected by the emotions, attachments, and complex inter-dynamics of that particular relational field. And while at times we may have that pull-back, that "what's going on here?" response mentioned above, for the most part this intuitive group-awareness, this exquisitely evolved capacity to "read" a social field, remains implicit, embodied, for clearly in awareness. We read the social field – but not easily out loud, in words.

Family sculpting, certainly, in the hands of Satir and many others, arose as an attempt to put words on this embodied “reading.” We live in human social systems, starting with the family (which is then “internalized,” thus always with us in one way or another). We orient to these “systems,” and react or respond to situations in ways that are constrained and informed by these “readings” (present or “transferred,” to use the psychodynamic term, from other, perhaps earlier and more governing contexts). And with family sculpting, we try to get a fresh look, a new sense of those out-of-awareness places where we’re being “pulled” by “systemic forces,” so to speak, that are not in our awareness.

One limitation of this technique, a constraint on the amount of fresh information we might get out of that kind of exercise, always lay in the fact that so much of the story was conveyed to the sculpture participants in narrative form. A generation or two ago, in a “pre-postmodernist” world, we had a less sharp appreciation of how much our narrative of a social system – and our own families all the more so – is already a co-construction with and in that very system and its members, already resolved into a fairly sturdy set of interpretations and meanings. We look to the sculpture to illustrate some of those meanings, and perhaps some of their implications and interactive consequences, but not so much as a source of new information, new interpretations about the constituent dynamics of that system. We’re mostly looking for the effects of known, narratized dynamics, on some system member (typically a child, who may be newly seen to be less free than we thought, to make some desired or needed move, which may only result in “systemic homeostasis” – ie, compensatory moves by other members to restore the upset balance, perhaps by pushing the child back out of the new behavioral terrain.

So what would happen if we moved to take a great deal, at least, of this pre-interpreted “story” back out of the Constellation? What if the participants, instead of “playing” a “role” to a pre-communicated story or “script,” simply had nothing (or little)

in the way of pre-structured story to go by? What would they use instead, as they oriented to the “sculpture” they had been inducted into? What would the induction consist in, if not a verbal relating of the pre-known story of this system? Where would any new information come from? And then would would be the import, the use of that “information?” Who would be the authority on where and how it might apply, have validity, be of use to the client?

Questions like these underlie the methodology known as Systemic Constellations. Typically, in Constellations work a client presents a system of concern, as the “theater,” past or present or both, of some felt issue of concern – to him/her. But instead of telling the “story” and describing the participant/representatives in psychological and narrative detail, the focus is primarily just on the felt concern. Examples might be things like, “I can’t seem to form a lasting relationship;” “I can’t feel love for/from my partner;” “I seem to be unable to have a child, for no known medical reason;” “I can’t get along with my siblings/boss/children/ coworkers/etc;” “I can’t connect with a career – can’t commit – keep getting exploited/victimized,” and on and on. The familiar chronic living problems of our own, our friends,’ our families’ and our clients’ lives – often problems of connection, sustaining relationship, nurturance, trust, orientation, self-sabotage, victimization, too little or too much feeling, and more.

Now in theory and practice, these living problems, and many others, may be played out and also may be explored in a great range of living systems, past and present. But frequently, with problems having to do with deep relational connection and disconnection, Constellations work will tend to zero in, for a lot of manifest reasons, on our early systems of belonging. One of the theory traditions Constellations work rests on, clearly, is Attachment Theory, supplemented with Satir’s emphasis on “basic validation,” which she (and Hellinger) see as needing to begin with a univalent flow of affirmation from elder generation to younger. Where this does not happen, children will frequently adjust to the unnourishing distance by moving toward the parent – even

(sometimes especially) an abusive parent, who however destructively is expressing and offering attachment, sometimes at a devastating price.

Added to this is the idea of “representing” absent, excluded, denigrated or otherwise marginalized members of the system: cast off former lovers and previous spouses, the dead who have not been recognized, perpetrators or other family members held with a sense of shame and exclusion, and systemic misfits of all kinds. To the extent that these marginalized figures are not recognized and given a due, appropriate “place,” psychically or psychologically in the family, then children may often take on the “role” of “representing” the marginalized figure (or legacy, or identity).

Again, these are familiar ideas from family systems work, but with greater emphasis here on the issue of a sort of “capture” of the child, in the service of a parent’s or the whole system’s needs for compensation, nurturance, and balance. When teachers from this tradition speak of “orders,” what they mean, generally, is a reference to simple statements of fact: time, belonging, precedence, relationship, inclusion/exclusion. Thus facilitators may ask representatives, or Constellation subject/clients, to simply *look at* a configuration of relationships (often “disordered,” in the sense that the younger generation is fixated (confluent, in a certain Gestalt language tradition) in some way on the family of origin system, and to that extent not free to move on with their own lives – again, a familiar idea in Gestalt, family systems, and other experiential or structural systems of understanding).

And from there facilitators may move to asking a constellation or structural representative to make some simple affirmative statements about the structural, systemic facts: such as, “you are the parent, I am the child;” “I see your painful fate, and I leave it with you;” “I’ve tried to carry your burden, and I’ve hurt myself in the process;” “you too belong to this system, you have a place” (this to some excluded or marginalized member); or even “you are my father, this is my partner; you are not my partner,” and more in that register. Awareness, affirmation of reality, bearing that with

support, presence in seeing, simple experience of what then comes up – again, here we are in the realm of very familiar Gestalt moves and ideas, albeit arrived at in a different way.

When a subject or client puts him/herself forward for one of these inquiries, typically the facilitator will conduct an interview with the idea of clarifying the issue, the felt desire for change, and perhaps the imagined outcome (in the sense of how you'll feel if we get to a place of greater freedom, closer to your desired state). The difference in this method, from much other family systems work, is that biographical and psychological/interpretive material is kept to a minimum – for the simple, Gestalt-friendly reason that the story is already there, already part of the problem, already being held in some “frozen,” non-helpful way by the client. That is, each of us has some narrative interpretation of events in our own lives, and to the extent that that story does not support us to move on freely and creatively, rehearsing it now with the facilitator will be more likely to forestall any new experience, than to facilitate it.

For this reason, once the distress or desire is clarified and stated clearly enough to launch an exploration, the facilitator will typically cut off the interview and ask the client to select representatives for him/herself, and a few other system members who seem relevant to the inquiry. For example, if the problem is a long series of failed relationships, then it may seem relevant to start with the client and the client's parents, to see if any new light can be shed on what system or “ground” dynamics, what frozen attachments or aversions in the past relational field, may be operating in a felt way that tends to block new movement and growth in this intimate area.

And then in a sense that's it. The client or subject takes the representatives and positions them around the available space without words (again that emphasis on how the story I already hold is a part of the problem – in a sense by definition, since if I were “holding” and living in/with this particular social field in a way that was supporting my own further creative growth, then I wouldn't be bringing the problem, the stuck area of

living, in for inquiry. Areas of my life where I am freely growing, fully living well, making productive commitments and creative expansions of my experience – and this is an article of faith in Constellations as in Gestalt – will be areas that are well-supported, “internally” and “externally.” In Constellations work, we would expect this to be reflected (if we were to take a look at a represented system, in the absence of a felt, unresolved problem) in felt systems (eg, my current experience of my family of origin system) that were arranged in configurations that supported free, choiceful, open commitments and relationships and movement going “forward” in my life (ie, moving out of my family of origin, in a free and comfortable way with a sense of a presence and an open blessing behind me), toward an open future of new engagements, new meaningful living. This is a kind of imagined ideal of a past family system, of course, but the point here is that in areas that really do feel rather like this, we will find we are free to move, live, and grow.

This kind of thinking of course parallels Gestalt perspectives on development, support, and shame. The areas of experiencing and living in which the child is developmentally supported – ie, reflected, received, “humanly validated” (in Satir’s terminology), and fully contacted by caretaking others – will then generally be areas where the growing person benefits from a sort of “virtuous circle” of learning and development. That is, since that area (passionate feeling, say, or reflective intelligence, or alert attunement to others, or robust embodied self-contact, etc) is affirmed and supported/received, the growing child and youth is free to invest intention and energy there without severe nurturant cost or conflict – and thus the area enjoys all the benefits of rich contacting processes: exploration and exfoliation, rich and complex linkages with other areas of living and experiencing (and we can see this now in the living brain, through fMRI imagery), overall complexification, building of a network of skills, and of course all the rewards and further support that full exercise of a supported capacity will tend to enjoy (like growing relationships with others, expanding and well-

integrated skill sets, integration with other related areas, creativity and problem solving, etc etc).

These are then not the areas that we generally bring in to therapy! Rather, these are the areas where we probably respond, when asked, that that part of our lives is going well. And part of going well, of course, is that we tend to have skills and capacity to continue to organize and use ongoing support, from others and “internally,” for our ongoing growth and complexification of experience in these areas. This is Gestalt.

It’s also Constellations. But how does that methodology work, what is the theory of change, how does new information come into the person’s experiential world, and get used for newer, more complex and creative living? This is where the more serious theoretical misgivings about Constellations on the part of some Gestaltists have tended to arise. Thus these are the more serious issues referenced at the outset of this paper.

In an earlier generation of Constellations work the evaluative criteria often seemed to come from an expert/objectivist perspective. This parallels some earlier work by a previous generation of Gestalt practitioners, where oftentimes we tended to see (for all the theoretical insistence on self-responsibility, authentic self-experience, and “autonomous criteria” of health) the reintroduction of the “Expert Model” by the back door. That is, the client was accorded the notional right to evaluate her/his own life, experience, and choices – but there was the “Gestalt expert,” telling him/her in no uncertain terms whether he/she was doing it right, or falling into “resistances” such as confluence, projection, retroflexion, and so on, in the old therapist/authority way that Goodman and Perls were so eager to get away from (but of course sometimes embodied).

In the same way, I’ve seen Constellations facilitators who seemed to be pronouncing “right answers,” more than openly exploring the experiential world of the client. In Gestalt terms this is the difference between a radical experimental/experiential stance,



and the collapse into the older, easier (for the facilitator, in the short term!) objectivist, right-wrong model.

But where do new information and new perspectives come from, in Constellations work, if not from the preconceived ideas of “orders” and authoritarian interpretive schemes of the facilitator? The answer is: from the lived, embodied experience *of the representatives* in the system being represented. That is (and to a degree you have to experience this, as a representative, to evaluate it), the information that will be fresh and useful, in an experimental, hypothetical, not objectivist sense, *will be the experience the representatives are having in the living, current, here and now system they are embodying and representing at the given moment.*

And here’s where the disquisition above on evolutionary theory and our embodied, exquisitely sensitive embeddedness in physically present human social systems comes into play. Here’s the working assumption operative in these exercises: as we stand in a social configuration evoked/arranged by a given client in a particular emotion/thought/mood space in relation to a particular felt issue, we may have some access to the embodied experience of simply standing in that configuration, at those distances and angles of contact and deflection, with a group of other human animals, recruited into the same shared intentionality.

Is this data “pure,” the question often arises? Isn’t it “contaminated” by the personal history of who happens to be selected? Don’t people “project” their own “stuff” and interpretations onto this situation and these roles, for all that we’ve tried to keep the story data to the barest minimum? Of course they may, and do. Surely if we’ve learned one thing in Gestalt, it’s that there’s no such thing as “pure data,” un-contextualized, -interpreted, and –conditioned by prior experience, beliefs, imaginal/projective estimations, evaluations, intentions and needs, and so forth. The question is not, is this data “pure”? The question is, is it useful? Is it different enough, fresh enough, “in contact” enough with the present embodied social reality, to offer

some new perspective, some new potentially useful insight, experimentally and hypothetically, into the felt dynamics of the client's experiential world?

This approach to the information generated in Constellations exercises is exemplified, in my experience, by teachers of roughly the "second generation" after Hellinger (who is himself still active, in his later eighties). Information of this kind is generated in basically two ways: one is by standing off and looking at the configuration as a whole, of the picture or social tableau generated by the client's placement of the representatives around the room. Just that. Those who have experienced well-facilitated family sculptures will know something of the potential of just this much, to generate a new insight into where the client or "the system" as a whole is stuck, feels unfree to move and change.

Secondly, and often even more richly, there are the representatives themselves, giving voice to their present experience in the configuration, with the accent (again, to hold narrative closure to a minimum) on embodied experience, without yet integrating that into an overall "understanding" of the system, much less some resolution of the problem. As in contemporary Gestalt work, the intention is to support an open inquiry into the dynamics of an experiential process. The fact that no inquiry is ever totally "open," in that older, objectivist sense, doesn't change the fact that this intention also enters into the organization of the present interaction, and may well support the emergence of new perspective.

After all, this is what creative process is, in Gestalt understanding. We slow down the process, support awareness of its component parts (here the experience of simply standing in that dynamic configuration), thereby deconstruct a previous integrated whole of understanding (perhaps a narrative self-understanding), and by differentially energizing/attending to selected elements of an attentional field, we favor the emergence of a newer, more complex, possibly richer resolution of that field of understanding. We don't inquire, in a Gestalt perspective on creativity, whether that

new product is in some sense utterly free of all preconceptions, all previous integrated understanding, all “transferred” or pre-organized structure (whatever that would mean). On the contrary, we assume that it is an outcome of everything we “bring to” the experience – plus something new, some new organization of the “same” elements, but differentially valorized, seen, attended to, and thereby invested with potential energy.

The process here is roughly the same. The facilitator serves in part, as in Gestalt, to propose experimental moves – not to “solve” the situation, but simply to see what difference that would make. Thus moving a representative to a different alignment in relation to the client’s representative is not a “solution” to a constellation, but an experiment, for the sake of generating data. Data in the representatives themselves, and new experience for the client her/himself, who is looking on, and registering possible new images.

In the end, these new images are the “product” of the constellation exercise. The process is thus very “right brain” – seeking and relying on whole pictures, as a possibly “internalized” schema of reference, which may serve to support new experience (as opposed to a new “story,” a linear arrangement of narrative elements, in the way of less embodied, less holistic, therapeutic traditions – ie, not Gestalt).

My goal in laying out these reflections in this draft for a forthcoming book introduction is not to persuade you of the worthwhileness of Constellations, as a method or a tool. Rather, it is to explore resonances between Constellations and Gestalt, which have sometimes been held as in some way conceptually opposed.

My conclusion about that question, which I offer you here, is that if you contrast an expert-based Gestalt with an expert-based Constellations approach (and both have existed, and to some extent do exist), then no, there is not really a difference in philosophy, just a difference in method. But, if you hold up and compare a contemporary understanding of Gestalt as a system of relational coconstructionism,

with a contemporary understanding of Systemic Constellations, then you find extremely resonant emphases on awareness, intention, relationship and attachment, embodied experience, experiment, and emergent meaning in both systems.

What Constellations in this understanding can add to some of our Gestalt approaches is then specifically in exploration of ground. Figure/ ground, both historically and methodologically, is a key concept and emphasis in Gestalt. And yet over the years we have often devoted much more attention to understanding “figure” (the sequence of feeling to intention to action, sequences or stages of contact, and so forth) than to a vocabulary and tool kit for exploring process structures of ground. We know that relational ground, attachment history, conditions and informs every attentional figure we form, and how we may energize and actualize those figures in living. We can see the truth of this Gestalt assumption now in contemporary cognitive neuroscience research. But where is our toolbox for understanding how relational “ground” operates to contextualize current process in the here and now? My own view is that Systemic Constellations, in its contemporary, non-authoritarian form, is a rich new tool for this emergent inquiry, and the ongoing, emergent evolution of Gestalt theory and practice.

*intro chapter -- Gordon Wheeler, Big Sur CA 2011*