

# An introduction to working with constellations

## And an invitation...

On Monday March 25<sup>th</sup> 2024 I will be facilitating a learning day for AoF on the topic of constellations. I thought it would be helpful to outline how and why I see constellations as a valuable tool for facilitators. I am also writing this to help myself and others tune in to the day, and to gather my own thoughts on what is one of my favourite ways of working with groups. I would be pleased to hear thoughts and questions in response to this pre-read, and even more pleased if you would join us on the day for some live exploration and learning together in a beautiful countryside setting.

**Bella Mehta**

AoF Co-founder and Director

## Why Constellations?

Constellations offer a relational and systemic view into groups, as well as practical ways forward in terms of individual and collective momentum. Change that arises in a group constellation is less of an action plan, and more of an internal shift that is felt and sensed. It's as if the activation of 'what next' happens *during* a constellation and the group is already on a new track as the constellation is complete. In a short time, and with few guided words and movements, the core work is underway. There is a feeling of something becoming resolved. But... perhaps I'm jumping ahead here and making it sound mystical and magical for those who haven't yet had experience of a constellation or irritating for those for who have had a different experience. It is neither 'magic' nor 'rocket science' and on our learning day we will be exploring when and how to facilitate a constellation in addition to considering practicalities, comparing notes, and having a go.

## What is the Constellations Approach?

In the context of group facilitation, a constellation is a systemic, three-dimensional living map showing people and their relationships with significant others; primarily other people, but also objects, concepts, places, ideas, timelines. The Constellations Approach is a visual and spatial way of working that combines insights from family therapy (Bert Hellinger, Virginia Satir,

Vivienne Broughton), existential phenomenology, transactional analysis, gestalt, other humanistic and psychodynamic approaches and studies of communication, consciousness and energy. The possibility for 'human things' that might be mapped are endless, and might include:

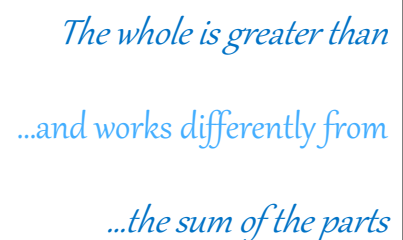
- a network of people, such as a team, department, organisation, family
- a theme, pattern, issue or feeling such as money, choice, failure, skills, health
- a view into one's evolving story, e.g. career, facilitation practice, relationships
- a perspective on where one belongs, such as a family, class, club, profession, country

According to constellations theory, a system functions best if it takes the following principles into account. Alignment with these principles can be explored using the living map:

- **Belonging** – Everyone has equal right to a place within the system
- **Order** – There is a correct order of positions within any system
- **Balance** – In any exchange there needs to be a balance between give and take

## A Systems View

The holistic or systems approach is in contrast to a traditional mechanistic or reductionist view, where understanding is generated by breaking things down into smaller and smaller components, e.g. a person's body will be made up of skin, organs, limbs, nerves, cells, chemical reactions, DNA, proteins, molecules, atoms etc. In a systems view, a different kind of understanding of a body is generated through consideration of an 'integrated whole' whose essential properties and qualities arise from the relationships and interactions between its component parts (e.g. life, growth, character, sexuality, genetic inheritance, health, vibe, posture, being 'just like grandad'). In a holistic and systemic view, a group is seen as:



*The whole is greater than  
...and works differently from  
...the sum of the parts*

- **Contextual** – the group state at any point in time depends on the wider situation (field)
- **Relational** – relationships, networks and patterns of relating are considered
- **Emergent** – properties of the whole are greater than the sum of the parts

- **Non-linear** – new patterns emerge through complex mechanisms and can include forward and backwards development (not cause and effect)
- **Dynamic** – groups and energetic ‘charge’ change over time and move in and out of balance through events and feedback
- **Self-organising** – the group parts orientate themselves within the whole group, each part responding to each other to create action, life, order and organisation

Because the mechanistic/traditional view dominates in our societies, organisations (and facilitators) can miss the holistic view, or not know *how* to offer a systemic perspective to clients, especially for short pieces of work (‘far too weird/touchy-feely’). At a felt level there is often a mismatch between theory and practice and we and our groups can feel stuck in ego-defensive positions: repeating old pattern and ‘not seeing the woods for the trees’. Facilitating with the constellations approach in mind allows a group to ‘lean back and squint sideways’ to make sense of a whole system in context.

## A flexible and step-wise approach

Constellation methods can be employed for group facilitation, team coaching, one-to-one coaching and self-supervision, as well in-the-moment in conversations, team meetings or away days, with appropriate scene setting. A constellation of a group or an individual’s situation includes aspects of their life, relationships, history, qualities, character and struggles; and feeling our way into facilitating this sensitively is a **step-wise** process. Typically, following a contracting phase, the steps are:

**The interview:** helping the **subject** to form a solution-focused question, e.g. ‘How can I improve team cohesion?’ (rather than ‘Why is my team so difficult?’)

**The set up:** agreeing boundaries and representative people or objects. These can be objects such as stones or shells for a table-top constellation, floor markers for a physical constellation in a room, and/or actual people as ‘**representatives**’ in a shared space, including online. The subject can also either witness or be part of their constellation. Representatives are carefully chosen to suit the question, without overwhelming, e.g. individuals (‘Bob from IT’), collectives

(e.g. 'Clients'), places (countries, offices, homes), concepts (e.g. service levels, business closure, AI, climate change) etc.

**Seeing What Is:** what happens for the subject when the system starts to be represented 'out there'. Many times, insight is gained merely from seeing and clarifying '**what is**'. In gestalt terms, 'figure' and 'ground' are modelled and elements of the constellation are brought into and out of focus for 'examination'. Dialogue is kept targeted, perhaps with short, key phrases being offered by the facilitator. It is different in quality from exploring an issue verbally back and forth as might be the case when using a conversational style of coaching or facilitation.

**Extending the work:** in this phase, the facilitator and representatives may follow an inner sense of emerging movement to extend the exploration, with minimal guidance from the facilitator. Generally, the quality here is of slowing down and seeing what emerges, while checking in with experiences, thoughts, feelings, sensations. Is there something missing? What movement is there between elements of the system (towards, away), and what quality does this have (blocking, envy, impatience, love, critique)? What is being blocked or defended against? Is there something that doesn't belong? Are there some 'healing' or resolving words that could be spoken to reframe a situation or repair a split? Are there differences that need drawing attention to? What enables harmony, letting go and moving on.

**Closing:** Has anything changed? Does this feel right/true/resolved (or resolved-enough)? How is it now – better, worse, no different? Is there a new perspective that brings us to a close?

## Examples

- I recently reviewed a difficult piece of work on my own, seated in my chair, using post-its in front of me on my desk to represent group members, intentionally seeking clarity and closure for myself. As both witness and subject, I experienced being back with the group in a 'slowed-down' imaginal and feeling way whilst simultaneously making sense, reminding myself of facts and the sequence of events, in order to learn and let go.
- With many AoF groups, we've used the constellations approach with groups to reveal subgroupings, connections, preferences, styles, history, stories, myths and hidden relationship and power dynamics as well as, practical issues: e.g. helping a group to look at how their

physical set-up and practices (office doors, open plan areas and homeworking) both hindered and helped communication.

- Throughout a strategy away-day, with a Board of Trustees, we kept returning to the question of the relationship with the stated vision. How aligned was each Trustee with the strategy, with each other? What energy, what resistance, what dependencies, what questions? The CEO, a woman who was trusted and liked, was able to gauge buy-in and respond to questions that legitimately and genuinely arose for her colleagues as they moved around, all within the same visual field mapping reporting lines and struggles. Perceptions of issues and pressures from different standpoints were articulated directly, still with mutual care and respect for difference and for the whole system. The ‘endless talking shop’ was avoided.
- I’ve used salt and pepper pots while having lunch with a friend to look at couple dynamics. We still talk about this, years later.
- I was part of a training group constellation looking at issues of race during the Black Lives Matter protests in lockdown. The biggest challenge (to myself) was that this constellation worked effectively online, with such a complex and emotionally charged area of enquiry, with a variety of representatives with different politics, life experiences, backgrounds, skin colours and countries of origin.

So, I’m still learning too, although there are helpful principles, techniques and methods that I look forward to sharing with you on our Learning Day.

## See you on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2024?

As well as learning some more of the basic principles and benefits of working with organisational and systemic constellations, there will be an opportunity to experiment, applying the constellations approach to real-world situations and dynamics, and debriefing our experience. A short closing session will link the day’s learning with your facilitation practice, whatever shape or stage you are at. Handouts and guidance/references for further exploration will be provided. Do join us.

[www.associationoffacilitators.co.uk](http://www.associationoffacilitators.co.uk)

## About Learning Days

*£80 members, £100 non-members; Lunch and refreshments provided;*

*10am-4pm, [Highfield Park, Hook](#)*

Association of Facilitator Learning Days offer a rich day of enquiry, collaborative learning and a gentle stretch. Participants leave with new ideas, resources and a refreshed practice having made and renewed connections.

Learning Days are an excellent opportunity for all facilitators (new, experienced and occasional) to meet, review and share good practice. These days are open to all AoF members and also offered as a Taster Day for those who are new to AoF and wish to work and learn in a collaborative environment. Do share details with those you know and feel free to call for more details and/or book a space if you want to find out more about the [Association of Facilitators](#).