

Discovering Hidden Dynamics: Applying Systemic Constellation Work to Ethnopolitical Conflict

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Introduction: Why Constellation Work?

Attempts to apply systemic approaches to ethnopolitical conflicts are motivated to a large extent by the success story of systemic approaches in managing organizational problems and conflicts (see, for example, Wils et al. 2007). If we look at disciplines such as organizational consulting and conflict management within organizations, it is striking that in the German-speaking countries the systemic approach and its application are closely bound up with one specific counselling/consulting method, namely systemic constellation work. Originating in family therapy, over the last five to ten years this has increasingly been applied by companies and organizations in order to assist managers or individuals involved in disputes to resolve conflicts.

As mediators and consultants with one foot in each of the working fields – organizational and ethnopolitical conflicts – we practise constellation work in organizations *and* we are most interested in utilizing the potential of this method for the field of conflict transformation. This article therefore aims to explore the potential to apply constellation work in relation to ethnopolitical conflicts. The specific added value offered by systemic constellation work in organizations is that it is a fast and effective method of:

- revealing hidden conflict dynamics, i.e. those which have so far gone unnoticed or have not been considered to an adequate extent; thereby,
- facilitating a better understanding of the conflict parties' emotional experience, hence,
- identifying new options and strategies for action.

We argue that this added value is also available when applying constellation work to the field of ethnopolitical conflicts.

After a brief description of the origins, bases and trends within constellation work and a discussion of how it works, we turn our attention to the underlying understanding of what constitutes a 'systemic' approach. In essence, it is a constructivist approach whose main characteristic is that it focuses on context factors and relationship dynamics rather than on the qualities of system actors. By applying this approach, conflict dynamics, which are often hidden at first, can be identified more easily. It is possible to distinguish three potential areas in which constellation work can be applied within the framework of systemic conflict transformation: first, counselling/consulting with third

parties; second, counselling/consulting with *one* conflict party; and third, the use of this approach within dialogue processes between two or more parties. Lastly, we draw attention to unanswered questions and the need for further research.

1. Concept, Origins and Usage

Constellations can be understood as a metaphorical form of conflict analysis and counselling/consulting which depicts the relevant factors and actors within the conflict system and their interrelationships. Unlike more familiar visualization forms (conflict mapping; feedback loop diagrams, Conflict Tree and so on), in constellations, persons – known as representatives – are used to depict actors and factors. For the duration of the constellation, these representatives depict persons, groups or institutions or even factors influencing the conflict such as ‘the past’, ‘event xy’ or ‘the goal’. For the purpose of the constellation, there needs to be one person with a knowledge and interest, known as the case-provider,¹ who has a specific issue or question relating to a certain conflict. This person is requested to position the representatives spontaneously and intuitively in such a way that they are situated at a subjectively appropriate distance from each other. The aim is not to produce a kind of organizational chart or a hierarchical structure but to show relationships between individual groups/persons and conflict factors, both with regard to the conflict itself and the specific issue to be addressed. The representatives are then interviewed about their body sensations, their perceptions and how they feel about being situated the way they are. The more this focuses on physical perceptions rather than on individual thoughts of the representatives, the more it turns out that people situated in a certain constellation sense more or less the same. This phenomenon is called *representative* perception in constellation terminology (see Section 2). It is not surprising given the fact that in everyday communication relationship qualities are quite often described by spatial metaphors combined with body sensations, e.g. somebody turns away from me/stands by me; to give someone the cold shoulder; to turn one’s back on somebody; to rub shoulders with somebody; to remain cold and distant; to be hot on someone’s heels. Case-providers very frequently confirm that the representatives’ statements are relevant to the conflict system depicted, even when the representatives themselves have no information about the depicted system.

The representative’s perceptions are the basis for rearrangements in the constellation, which means carefully changing the positions of the representatives. The aim of these interventions is to create a situation where all members of the system feel better – or at least to make those who felt bad at the beginning feel more comfortable without any worsening for others. Hence, multi-partiality and inclusiveness are integral to constellation work, which makes it so valuable for conflict transformation. The representatives’ statements and the rearrangements usually generate a number of new ideas and options in the case-provider’s mind because they are like hypotheses about meaningful interventions encoded in the metaphor. The rearrangements, which can also include

¹ We prefer the term ‘case-provider’ instead of client because the latter can easily be misconstrued as constructing a relationship where the client ‘does not know’ while the consultant ‘already knows’, which is not the case.

adding a new element or suggesting that the representatives make specific statements (e.g. apologies, requests) to each other are usually suggested by the facilitator. They have an experimental character, based on the facilitator's experience.

Constellations should not be confused with role plays. In the latter, the players work with their own interpretations and associations regarding certain scenarios based on previous personal experience and prior knowledge, whereas constellations are based on representative perception and are generally not personalized. Of course, this can be counteracted by individuals' own conscious interpretations and agendas. For that reason, it is actually beneficial if the representatives are not experts on the topic or if they trust in the counselling/consulting process and are willing to set their own expert opinion aside for the time being.

Constellation work originates in the 'family sculpture' work pioneered by the American family therapist Virginia Satir, who would ask her clients to create a 'sculpture' of their family as a form of spatial metaphor representing family relationships (Nerin/Satir 1986). The method was developed further by her students Thea Schönfelder, Les Kadis, Ruth McClandon, Bert Hellinger and others. Largely as a result of Hellinger's work, the method became well-known in the German-speaking countries, with Hellinger's numerous major events and publications achieving a high level of awareness of the method in the field of family therapy. But although Bert Hellinger's pioneering achievements are undisputed, his highly controversial, often disrespectful and ethically dubious treatment of clients brought constellation work into widespread disrepute (Haas 2004). The profession has now clearly distanced itself from his practices and made it clear that those practices certainly are not part of the method itself (Systemische Gesellschaft 2004).

Gunthard Weber, Hellinger's best-known student, and others after him have applied constellation work to conflicts within organizations. Matthias Varga and Insa Sparrer, with their concept of Systemic Structural Constellations, have developed and trialled numerous other forms of application as well. Whereas Hellinger's approach was largely based on normative premises of how to resolve conflicts ('the orders of love'; cf. Hellinger et al. 1998), Varga von Kibed/Sparrer (2000) and Sparrer (2007) consistently rely on constructivist-systemic thinking and dispense with normative components.

Systemic constellation work is widely used as a tool in organizational consulting and conflict management in companies and non-profit organizations (NPOs) in the German-speaking countries. Its specific benefits are that:

- it quickly opens up unusual perspectives, generates new hypotheses and thus broadens the scope for action,
- it offers the opportunity to trial and evaluate options for action and their effects within the constellation,
- it generates sensory responses and insights into the situation and the perspective of 'difficult' conflict parties, more than almost any other method,
- it allows a shift of perspective,
- it makes visible the influence of the broader context on the conflict process, and thus
- it allows a high level of complexity without becoming overly concerned with detail.

In the English-speaking countries, constellation work has attracted less attention. There are only a few English-language websites focusing on this topic, and many of those that exist are run by German, Austrian or Swiss consultancies. Some of Hellinger's publications have been translated into English, and there is one specialist constellations journal published in English ('The Knowing Field'), but it does not cover the full spectrum of the German-language professional debate. The journal focuses almost exclusively on concepts that are based on Hellinger's own constellation work or derive their inspiration from shamanism.

2. How Come it Works?

There is still no comprehensive, broadly approved scientific explanation of how constellations work. Practitioners refer to different concepts. Some refer to shamanic concepts and see constellations as a kind of ritual which has an inherent healing power (Kampenhout 2008). Other authors refer to Rupert Sheldrake's 'morphogenetic fields' hypothesis (1995), which is not generally accepted by the scientific community (Weber et al. 2005; Mayr 2008, Mahr 2007). Sheldrake draws attention to various natural phenomena in which information apparently flows without any discernable medium of communication. For example, certain species of plant do not flower every year, and yet plants within the same population always flower at the same time. Sheldrake postulates the existence of what he terms 'morphogenetic fields' in which information is 'stored' independently of time and space. Numerous constellation practitioners assume that constellations create access to such fields; this is reflected in publication titles such as 'The Knowing Field'.

Strikingly, it is often reported that in constellations, symptoms occur which match exactly with aspects of the real system, like a particular disease. For example, while s/he is positioned in a constellation, a person displays a certain kind of behaviour (e.g. mental confusion, or pain in a specific part of the body) which is typical of the person being represented. This happens even when no relevant information has been provided. This could suggest a kind of metaphysical transfer of information. Some practitioners even state that this information transfer works the other way around, arguing that a constellation is likely to have an impact on the resembled system itself *beyond* the people who actually witnessed it.

In our view, this kind of argument and the above mentioned conceptual background reinforces perceptions of constellation work as esoteric. We prefer the constructivist approach which doubts that constellations resemble the 'real' system. Instead, we see them as a complex metaphor for the 'inner picture' of the case-provider (see, for example, Weber et al. 2005). This inner picture is composed of conscious analytical cognitive knowledge and unconscious elements from the field of subconscious perception, experienced-based knowledge and intuition. However, it is empirically corroborated that constellations are not pure chance because, as a rule, even highly sceptical case-providers find the initial statements of representatives, once positioned, to be extremely relevant to the real situation (Mayr 2008; Kohlhäuser/Aszländer 2005; Schlötter 2005). This applies even in a blind constellation in which the repre-

representatives do not know who or what they are representing or which conflict is being addressed.

The 'representative perception' premise, namely that people who are situated in constellations feel and verbalize similar body sensations that are dependent on the spatial constellation (angle and distance to others) and are thus largely independent of the person, has been demonstrated by Peter Schlötter (2005) in an experimental study with a high degree of significance. Using life-size dolls, he re-created a picture from a real-life constellation. He then switched the dolls with real people (subjects) in various positions. In a test, he then asked the subjects to verbalize their perceptions. A qualitative analyses of the statements showed that they were significantly similar to each other. In a second, quantitative test, subjects were asked to assign prepared sentences to the various positions. They did so *non-randomly*, with an extremely high level of significance (probability of error < 0.1%) and without any significant correlation with gender, age, opinion or knowledge of constellation work.²

Futhermore, we have experimented with performing constellations in separate rooms, involving two case-providers working together on a single issue. We found that until the representatives began to make their statements, the participants created almost identical starting pictures.³

Various studies have investigated the question of constellations' effectiveness (Kohlhäuser/Aszländer 2005; Mayr 2008; Schlötter 2005; Roevens/van den Berg 2007), mainly by conducting follow-up studies to determine the changes that have arisen for the case-provider as a result of a constellation. Here, high values are regularly achieved for a better understanding of the individual's own conflict and changes in their method of dealing with it. In some cases, however, these changes are vague and cannot be described in terms of concrete action (cf. Mahr 2007). This latter factor has convinced us that it is useful, at least in the ethnopolitical field, to undertake explicit evaluations of the constellation by observing what has occurred in the constellation process and then analysing and 'translating' it together with all participants. This generates hypotheses about options for action (see case study). Various constellation practitioners working in the field of family constellations, but also in organizational constellations, regard this translation approach as harmful (cf. Weber et al. 2005). They argue that the side that is present (the case-provider) could already improve the situation by means of unilateral intuitive changes in behaviour, and fear that this could be impeded by the process of 'talking about it'. No comparative studies are available at present. On strategic issues in particular, we believe that the constellation process must be opened up to discussion as this is the only way to operationalize the various perspectives of the individual representatives and observers as important feedback. It is also the only way to incorporate results swiftly and directly into written concepts, interventions, etc. At the same time, discussion and evaluation of the constellation process offer a good opportunity to remove constellation work from the realms of 'enchantment' and embed it in hard realities, thus counteracting accusations that constellations are arbitrary and esoteric.

2 As a rule, in quantitative social research, probabilities of error between 1% and 5% are considered permissible.

3 These experiments are not sufficiently quantifiable at present. Out of seven double constellations carried out, six were virtually identical and one was significantly different.

Although the precise reasons why constellations work have yet to be clarified, the empirical studies described above attest to their high level of effectiveness with respect to the three criteria mentioned in the introduction. It would make sense to compare this with data about the effectiveness of other consulting/counselling/reflection/analytical instruments. To our knowledge, however, corresponding data about other methods are not available.

When considering the question of how systemic constellations work, it is also helpful to consider the following: precisely because we work on the assumption that, as described above, constellations represent the case-providers' inner picture and are not an objective depiction of the system, it only makes sense to make a constellation if the case-provider has a connection with the case, i.e. if s/he has an issue which is relevant to him/herself or his/her organization in terms of action in relation to the conflict. Performing constellation work merely as a general conflict analysis exercise without any relevance to specific decision-making and action would be an abuse of the method. A constellation always centres on the relationship between the case-provider (= observer) and the system, and that is its strength. The method thus reflects the fundamental systemic/constructivist recognition that there can be no observation without observers, and that the observer is always involved in constructing the system and/or interacts with it.

3. The Underlying Understanding of 'Systemic'

3.1 A Comparative Definition

Constellation work, as we understand it, is a highly systemic method because hypotheses are generated entirely from the relationship dynamics and the interaction between context factors, *not from the qualities of the actors* themselves. This is the core of our understanding of the term *systemic*, which is defined by Matthias Varga von Kibéd as follows:

“An explanation (theory, methodology, approach, definition of terms, thinking, idea, form of therapy, intervention) A is more systemic than explanation (theory...) B, by definition, when A allows a shift away from the attribution of qualities to system elements (and towards the observation of relationships, structures, contexts, dynamics and choreographies) to a greater extent than B” (Varga von Kibéd 2005).

This definition describes *systemic* in a comparative way. That is, it does not determine 'systemic' in terms of 'Yes' or 'No' but 'more' or 'less'. Why does this make sense? A binary definition of 'systemic' would not be very systemic in fact – at least not in a constructivist way because 'systemic' would then be seen as a quality that something possesses regardless of its relationship to the context. This is not compatible with the given definition in itself because it relies on the assumption of qualities rather than relations. By contrast, the comparative definition mentioned above captures the basic insight of systems theory in that it indicates that differences are much more meaningful than the entities between which they exist.⁴

⁴ “We can know what is better without knowing what is good” (de Shazer 1996, pers. comm., quoted in: Varga von Kibéd/Sparrer 2000, 60). “Information is a difference that makes a difference” (Bateson 1972, 459).

The comparative definition also gives an answer to the much-debated question about whether or not conflict transformation has been systemic all along, implying that the systemic approach is nothing new. Based on the comparative framework we are able to recognize that something is systemic to a certain extent but could be even ‘more systemic’.

3.2 Contexts Rather Than Qualities: A Constructivist Approach

The key criterion of ‘more systemic’ is the shift away from the attribution of qualities in favour of a consideration of relationship structures. In this understanding of ‘systemic’, systems theory and constructivist epistemology meet. Both question whether qualities – in terms of ontological realities – exist at all. From a constructivist perspective attitudes and behaviours which appear to be the qualities of an actor are perceived as ‘qualities of the overall system’, existing only in relationship to others, i.e. they are localized in the context rather than in the actors themselves. Hence, it is essential to capture attitudes such as dominance, aggression, etc. as constructs which only come into being in a certain relational context and do not exist as qualities of a person or group, i.e. actor.

With regard to ethnopolitical conflict, we are not only dealing with individuals but actors such as political parties, governments and armed groups. The behaviour of these actors, their opinions on the disputed issues, political positions and programmes and their stances towards peace processes – when thinking systemically – should be seen as emerging from the context rather than from their inner attitudes. This makes a huge difference because a great many conflict transformation programmes focus on changing inner attitudes and/or qualities of stakeholder groups or institutions, which is not generally in line with a systemic approach.

A typical pattern, for example, is the following dynamic between like-minded (i.e. pro-peace forces within a society) and hardliners who are strongly opposed to negotiating peace and a political solution. Numerous conflict transformation programmes aim to strengthen the like-minded through capacity building, training, technical support etc.; in other words, they aim to change the *qualities* of the actors in the above sense. Such interventions, according to the above definition, cannot be described as highly systemic. In practice, a reciprocal increase in activities and social support for the hardliners can often be observed – in effect restoring a balance in accordance with the following pattern: the stronger the like-minded, the stronger the hardliners. Taking it to extremes, it could even be argued that the same result could have been achieved through targeted strengthening of the hardliners (Ropers 2008, 15). For our purposes, this description and analysis of the pattern are highly systemic, precisely because they focus not on the qualities and attitudes of the actors but on the dynamics between them. This raises the question of which factors are able to stabilize the balance dynamics described, what this means for the system as a whole, and to what extent, for whom and under which conditions it is functional. Answering these questions is likely to lead to very different interventions from the ones described above.

A similar pattern is based on the mechanism of ‘ethnic outbidding’ (cf. Ropers 2008): in a country in which there are violent conflicts with ethnic minority C, two

major parties (A and B) are rivals for power. The more efforts A makes towards peace with C, the more vigorously this is undermined by B in the power struggle. However, if B makes similar overtures towards C, A becomes the opponent of the peace efforts. In this pattern, interventions which aim to change the qualities of actors (e.g. by generating a more constructive, peace-promoting attitude) are not appropriate to achieving the desired effect. In a constellation, this dynamic is likely to be revealed. Furthermore, options for changing it might appear, e.g. issues that have to be tackled in order to increase cooperation between A and B.

Another example: persons whose attitudes (qualities) have already been ‘successfully’ changed, e.g. in conflict resolution training or dialogue processes, and who also verbalize this fact, often revert to the ‘old’ destructive patterns of behaviour as soon as they become political office-holders. This reveals the limits of non-systemic explanatory models and interventions. System dynamics and context appear to be more significant than the actors’ qualities.

Principled negotiation and human needs theory generally also focus on the level of the system actors’ qualities, as they are based on the interests/needs of the conflict parties. In terms of the argument set out above, this can be described as an attribution of qualities. Hence, it is not very systemic. It is beyond question that the search for options to reconcile needs and interests which seem to be incompatible (win-win) generally forms the basis for viable solutions. *However, where this does not work, a more systemic approach, which looks beyond qualities and focuses on dynamics instead, may generate added value because the functionality of the conflict for the system as a whole becomes the focus of interest.* Donella Meadows (2008) refers in this context to Systems Goals: in other words, what are the benefits when the system works as it does? In her ranking of different change options for systems, she includes interventions based on this approach as being among the most effective. We refer to functionality rather than goals in order to make clear that this benefit is not necessarily intended.

4. Possibilities of Application

In the field of conflict transformation, systemic constellation work has received very little attention to date. There are various possible reasons for this: First, very little English-language material is available on constellation work. Second, the method is still unjustly associated primarily with the field of psychotherapy, even though organizational constellations have long since led to the emergence of a new branch, which is being applied in strategic consulting on intervention designs in complex situations. Third, the method has shown itself to be difficult for the academic debate to access. Admittedly, its effectiveness can be regarded as empirically proven (see Section 2), but a broadly approved scientific explanation of *why* it works is missing. Finally, the way in which many practitioners present and offer constellation work also has an effect: the impression is sometimes created that this is an esoteric exercise.

Recently, a number of constellations have been documented which deal with ethno-political issues, and various conceptual studies have been published. For example, Mayr (2008) compares the basic ideas of constellation work with Lederach’s conflict

transformation concept and Galtung's "Transcend Method" and concludes that there is a good fit. However, the only case studies available are those where the case-provider is affected by the conflict as an individual, not as a political actor or representative of a third party (Mahr 2002, Kampenhout 2008, Atkins 2007, Meghian-Zenati 2008). Exceptions are the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation, which used constellation work with various stakeholder groups in Nepal (Godavari 2006) and Afghanistan (Carvalho et al 2010), and Mahr (2007), who reports a constellation where a capacity building project for the Commission of the African Union was examined. Cohen (2008) documented a constellation for a peace NGO on the grassroots level in Haifa, Israel, as well.

Furthermore, there is the International Forum for Political Constellations (IFPC), established in 2002, which investigates and explores the applicability of the constellation method to political and strategic issues.

We see three fields of possible application of constellation work with respect to conflict transformation:

- counselling with third parties involved in dialogue or mediation in order to improve planning, strategizing and reflecting on one's work,
- consulting with representatives of conflict parties or stakeholders aiming at empowerment, 'preparing them for the table' and developing shared conflict analyses,
- dialogue processes with two or more conflicting parties in cases where a certain level of trust can be established between the people who are present.

4.1 Counselling/Consulting with Third Parties

Most experience with constellations relates to the first field, i.e. counselling with third parties. Here, constellations have proved to be a valuable complement to other tools, i.e. other formats of conflict analysis or organizational development tools. The main focus is on the context of relationships instead of referring to opinions and attitudes of the actors. It provokes a shift of perspectives and helps a third party to put him/herself into other actors' shoes. It also helps to reveal overlooked context factors, particularly relationships within the parties and the factors related to the mandate of the third party. There is a broad spectrum of questions that can be tackled through constellations. The following examples illustrate the variety:

A typical pattern occurring in constellations is that one or more representatives look in a certain direction and say their look is very fixed. This happened in a constellation of a reconciliation project in a war-torn country. The project-officer, who worked with an INGO which conceptualised and financed the project, requested a counselling session with external consultants because he found it difficult to collaborate with his counterpart from the local implementing NGO. In the constellation, both representatives – the case-provider's and the counterpart's – stared at the same point and were unwilling to look at each other. The facilitator suggested adding a representative at the place they were looking at. This representative was then interviewed and felt very ashamed. It occurred to the case-provider that this might be a metaphor for the 'backstory/history' of the project when the case-provider's predecessor halted the proj-

ect in its planning phase without explanation to the counterpart. This had been treated as a taboo issue so far and the case-provider now realized that it might make a difference to talk about this openly to his counterpart.

In another case, the case-provider completely changed her mind about which issue to address. The constellation was about an incident between the Peuhl and the Tuareg, two pastoralist African tribes. The case-provider situated the *representative* of one Tuareg group looking away from all the others, which suggested that this group might have felt marginalized. In the constellation, it proved possible to integrate this group by addressing the intra-Tuareg tensions, which had not been possible before because the case-provider (and her INGO) was too focused on the Tuareg-Peuhl tensions. The constellation helped her become aware of this. This pattern – shifting the focus from inter-party to intra-party conflict – frequently appears in constellations.

Insights about how to be accepted as a neutral broker by the conflict parties were at the heart of a third example. A local NGO was eager to mediate between two pastoralist tribes (A-tribe and B-tribe) who were engaged in a fierce cross-border conflict about access to a certain piece of land. A-tribe increasingly encroached this area (which belonged to country A) although it was traditionally used by B-tribe which regularly moved in from country B. The governments of government A actively backed the position of the one tribe with military intervention, while the government of B remained disinterested. Due to the fact that the conflict was well-known and highly sensitive to the group, we suggested a blind constellation, which means that the people who are put into the constellation do not know whom or what they represent. This is a common way to ensure that personal information about the conflict does not influence the representative perception. The case-provider situated his own NGO, which belonged to B, behind and across from the B-government, which made the latter feel very uncomfortable. This could be eased by shifting the NGO's position, which could be interpreted as: 'Be more transparent towards your government'. The second insight for the case-provider was that an NGO from country B was needed because only then did both tribes feel that they would be willing to commit to negotiations.

4.2 Counselling/Consulting with One Conflict Party

The second of the above-mentioned fields of application – consulting with one of the conflicting parties – is virtually untested in relation to inter-ethnic conflict. However, in organizational consulting it is very common to use constellations – if they are used at all – for counselling with one conflict party. Hence, we believe there is great potential for consulting with single parties engaged in ethnopolitical conflict as well. We had the opportunity, on one occasion, to utilize constellation methods combined with sculpture work in workshops with Track-II actors in a civil war and found the results promising (see Splinter/Wüstehube 2005).

Of course, the prerequisites are more stringent than when working with third parties because the more involved a case-provider is in the conflict, the more likely s/he is to be traumatized and victimized by having been exposed to violent contexts for a long time. This also makes it more painful and challenging to take account of other perspectives. Strikingly, our frequent experience in constellations is that this seems to work

more intensively and quickly and can even be more face-saving compared to other methods. This may be because constellations refrain from pointing a moralizing finger.

When applying constellations in this way, it is not always necessary for a group of people to be present. For example, if only one person is present in the room, namely the case-provider, it is not uncommon for him/her to position chairs or other symbols, rather than people, around the room. In order to be able to interview the various actors, the case-provider then situates him- or herself in the various positions in sequence. This yields similar results to the method described above.

4.3 Dialogue Between Conflict Parties

Regarding dialogue between two or more parties, the question of whether it is possible and appropriate to apply constellations depends on the type and phase of the dialogue process. If there is too much mistrust in the room, constellations would only lead to further escalation because parties would assume that the others are misusing the constellation deliberately. It is hard to imagine that the people involved in a constellation would be open to representative perception under those circumstances. They would rather rely on their personal information and thoughts, which would make the constellation malfunction. Hence, in organizational mediation, we use constellations as a means of working with both parties simultaneously but only up to a certain level of escalation. Nonetheless, it is very powerful. Similarly, there are dialogues – even in highly escalated violent conflicts – in which a sufficient level of trust can be established and the participants are more open to learning about the other one's perspective.⁵ Here, constellations can be an extremely effective instrument for dialogue because they help the parties to put themselves into the other one's shoes, thus increasing trust and providing insights for joint conflict analyses. It might be assumed that constellations are too 'weird' and hence unlikely to be accepted. However, since there are already methods in use, even in political dialogue, which are very different from everyday forms of communication (such as role plays or storytelling), it is not too much of a change. It is more a question of how the facilitator handles it.

4.4 Is it Culturally Appropriate?

One possible concern is whether constellation work is culturally appropriate in all settings. To our knowledge, no specific research has been done so far with regard to this question. However, it is obvious that the systemic approach to constellations has a lot in common with certain pre-modern world views about how individuals and their environment (including ancestors and history) are interlinked, e.g. the African 'Ubuntu'. This suggests that constellations can be applied more easily in contexts where those ideas are more alive than in 'Western' societies. Some constellation facilitators even explicitly refer to these traditional concepts. The blind constellation mentioned above

⁵ In terms of Glasl's nine steps of escalation: the escalation between the people present at the moment needs to be below three while the overall conflict can even be as high as eight (Glasl 1999).

(see Section 4.2.) was done with a group of people from various African countries who were not familiar with Western training or consulting methods. However, there was no significant difference in the way it worked. Accordingly, in the journal ‘The Knowing Field’, constellation workshops in China⁶, Hong Kong (Ulsamer 2007) and Rwanda (Mahr 2004) are reported. They focused mainly on the field of family therapy, but the constellation approach itself worked well⁷. Joseph Roevens (2009) interviewed facilitators who are experienced with constellations. Only two out of seventeen disagreed with the statement “Cultural background or age has little or no influence on whether one finds constellation work effective or not”. Nevertheless, this experience is rather anecdotal and has to be corroborated through systematic research.

Conclusion and Further Research

The systemic approach presented in this article is based on a constructivist understanding, defining *systemic* in a comparative way as the extent to which something (a theory, an explanation or an intervention) relates to the context and relationships of the actors in a system instead of to the qualities of the actors themselves.

Constellation work is based on this concept. It is widely used in the field of organizational counselling in German-speaking countries. In this article, we described how this method can be transferred and applied to the field of ethnopolitical or macro-social intra-state conflicts. Of course, the systems in this field are much larger. The actors are usually not individuals but groups or organizations/institutions (e.g. governments, political parties, civil society organizations, non-state armed groups, ethnic or religious groups). They take certain political agendas and positions which allow them to be defined, for example as peace constituencies, like-minded, moderate or hawks. In terms of this understanding of the term *systemic*, political agendas and attitudes (e.g. towards peace, violence or democracy) should not be seen as *qualities* of the actors but as emerging through context. However, a lot of peace work focuses on influencing these qualities: there are training and dialogue programmes seeking to change attitudes of actors, or programmes which aim to improve the qualities of institutions.

A more systemic approach *additionally* looks for neglected context factors, e.g. relationships to foreign powers or collective traumata, as seen in the case studies presented. Integrating such factors into conflict transformation programmes – according to the basic hypothesis – is likely to provide points of leverage in order to shift the dynamics of the conflict system.

Constellation work implements this approach in a very consistent way because it completely focuses on context factors. It uses a metaphorical spatial language: human beings who represent the system’s elements are arranged in a room to spatially resemble their relationships. The ensuing interviews and rearrangements lead to insights such as:

⁶ For more details please check: *The Knowing Field*, issue 13, 2009.

⁷ As mentioned before, we are critical about some of the authors’ underlying concepts of *why* constellations work. Nevertheless, their experience confirms *that* it works.

- discovering hidden dynamics of the conflict
- integrating new perspectives into conflict analyses
- reflecting on and further developing one's own strategy
- reflecting on relationships between third parties and conflicting parties
- understanding other perspectives in a deep emotional way

In different examples it was shown how this works in terms of counselling with third parties/NGOs/INGOs. We pointed out that further fields of application of constellation work are counselling/consulting with single conflict parties and dialogue between two or more parties. The described systemic approach and, of course, constellation work itself might look unfamiliar at first. Nevertheless, we think that not utilizing its potential for transforming intractable ethnopolitical conflicts would be a regrettable waste.

But how do constellations actually work? That is an area where further research is required. It can be regarded as proven that the body sensations of the representatives in a constellation, known as the representative perception, correlate with the spatial constellation to a highly significant degree (see Section 2). However, no systematic investigation has yet been undertaken into the informative value of the starting picture set up by the case-providers. For example, is the way in which a case-provider positions the participants entirely random? There are various indications that this is not the case – case-providers are very often surprised by just how well the statements of the representatives in the starting picture match their (the case-provider's) understanding of the actual situation. This is reported without exception by many different practitioners but needs to be backed by systematic and quantifiable research.

The same applies to the journey from the starting picture to the end picture: in other words, the rearrangements within the constellation. Would different constellations that begin with the same starting picture yield the same or at least complementary results? The challenge here is to verify whether *theoretical* reproducibility exists, although in reality, the starting picture can never be reproduced exactly – if two consecutive constellations were made with the same case-provider, the starting situation after the first constellation would already be different. This means that in order to compare the process and results, separate constellations would need to be made with several persons who have approximately the same knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the case. However, it is unrealistic to assume that two persons could have an identical starting view of a conflict. Fine distinctions could lead to completely divergent results: a fact which itself confirms basic systemic assumptions. To date, however, it has not been possible to resolve this dilemma through research.

For the time being, then, we must decide whether to use constellation work as a method even though the precise way in which it works is still not scientifically proven. However, as systemic constellation work has shown itself to be extremely useful, both in terms of counselling/consulting with third parties and in work with conflict parties themselves, we are strongly in favour of its continued application in practice.

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