Abstract

This article is about organizational change based on the new perspective of Systemic Constellations, by means of a brief analysis of two doctoral theses, one in Spanish from Spain, one in English from the Netherlands. The results were obtained from various geographical and professional contexts, and suggest new ways of decision-making in organizations, more from the perspective of what can be done, than of what should be done.

Keywords: Systemic Constellations, Organizations, Human Resources, Management, Decision-making.

1. Perspective & Rationale:

“A group of people stand silently together in a room somewhere in Finland, each individual experiencing what it feels like to be standing in a certain spot, in close vicinity to others. Suddenly one of the people starts to perspire, and appears to be feeling uncomfortable. The group’s coach, facilitator Barbara Malmström, goes to that individual who is breaking out in a sweat, and carefully guides him to stand in another place. The uncomfortable feeling diminishes. The individual feels better now, standing in a different location in relation to the other group members in the room. Later on, when everyone talks about the situation during debriefing, it is revealed that the individual who felt uneasy represented a person who used to work for the company for a long time before being fired quite unexpectedly. The work environment had been left with a deep scar because of the badly dealt with dismissal.” (translated from Finnish, Tammilehto, 2015, p.10)

This is an example of a phase of a typical “Systemic Constellation” applied to an organizational question, and therefore also called “Organizational Constellation”, a rather novel perspective, and approach, to deal with questions in organizations. Even if Organizational Constellations have been applied, and written about, since the 1990s, academic research on this perspective is rather limited. Two doctoral theses, one published in Spanish in Spain (Gómez, 2005) and another published in English in the Netherlands (Roevens, 2008) are pioneers in this research, while this perspective increasingly reaches a more globalized development worldwide. When we compare the results of the most important Systemic Constellation research in Europe, especially in Germany, the UK, France and Spain, for example by Ruppert, Jurg, Motto (Roevens, 2008), Echegaray (2008) and Gómez (2005), we may conclude that the results that they offer are similar, and that they demonstrate a high level of congruence about the application of the Systemic Constellation perspective in organizations.

Many people are able to sense how someone else feels, and sometimes even what he thinks, for example, when we complete that person’s sentence. In addition, people are able to notice relational structures and patterns, i.e. systemic interrelations and representations. This systemic information
seems to be stored in us in some way, and serves as an affective and cognitive scheme that directs our actions. Systemic Constellations show us that unconscious images and information, can be externalized and converted into spatial representations, i.e. the ‘Constellation’, which reenact certain systemic dynamics (Horn and Brick, 2009). People who behave as representatives, also called stand-ins, for members of an organization seem to be able to capture the externalized representation of the organizational system, perceiving and reproducing the problematic issue that is occurring in the organization. During a Systemic Constellation it seems that some sort of “sensitive tuning” takes place between the representatives and the actual organizational members they represent, giving them the capacity to visually display what goes on in that organization. By setting up a Systemic Constellation to investigate such an issue, information surfaces about the structures, the dynamics and the interactions in the system. And that information in turn enables the surfacing and developing of insights and understandings of specific social interrelations, that provide a solution for that issue. The Systemic Constellation perspective brings underlying causes to the surface, which can then be dealt with, while respecting everyone’s responsibility and dignity as a member of the organization.

A Systemic Constellation always starts with a particular question that someone presently has about his organization. Based on that person’s ‘image’ of the situation, a Constellation A is set up. Then a series of intermediate process steps are used, for example, small replacements, questions to the representatives, etc., to arrive to a final image, a final “Constellation Z” (Hellinger, 2001: 429-430). With each process step the client who brought in the question gets a clearer perspective on a potential solution, and can then decide to act upon that information, or not.

One benefit of the Systemic Constellation perspective is that it allows us to come up with a lot of useful organizational information in a very short time-span (Gómez, 2007: 241-244), which will help the introduction of appropriate actions in the organization.

2. Some descriptions on the subject.

Those who have empirically undergone a constellation, seem to have experienced that every individual has a strong connection to, and relation with, his past, with his background, with his organization and with those people over which he has (had) a strong direct influence, for example, when you have prevented someone from getting fired. This brings about a new perspective on understanding professional actions and interventions, with its potential benefits, as well as with its limitations.

In Spain there have been some interpretations of the model within the field of psychotherapy (Alonso, 2005). Constellations were first introduced as a form of family therapy, only a decade later a specific derivative developed for organizational analysis. These therapeutic interpretations have caused a stir in Spanish academic publications for a number of years. We will present these arguments - which do not coincide with the phenomenological nature of the perspective nor with its results, as we understand it - and also refute them. While referring to Family Constellations, Alonso (2005: 85-96) acknowledges that “in spite of the huge acceptance that the perspective has enjoyed, its effectiveness remains to be established, and the assumptions on which it is based, need to be verified. Still some of its ingredients are worth considering, for example, its particular way of framing psychological problems in a trans-generational perspective. In addition, the technique itself is novel and may be a powerful tool for discovering significant dynamics in interpersonal relations.” Alonso ignores the phenomenological objectives of the perspective, which means that it is not possible to prescribe in advance what a good outcome for a particular client in therapy would be, nor is it therapeutically productive to somehow measure the effects of the constellation on his behavior.
Working with a phenomenological perspective means that we recognize that our thinking is limited. We are limited by our own subjective interpretation of reality, and by our ideas about what should be, whereas we could learn to observe reality with a fresh, doubting, not-knowing mind. Also by being aware of three heuristics that have frequently come up while working with the Systemic Constellation perspective. These heuristics are the principles of rank-order, of belonging and of equity, and become visible in the set-up of a Constellation. Rank-order means that there exists a hierarchy of influence, which may depend on seniority, on competency, on established hierarchy or on another dynamic. It means that each member has a specific place within the organization from which he operates most efficiently. For example, when a team-leader appropriately carries the responsibilities of his team, he is operating from his right place. However, if he does not take on his responsibilities, but takes credit for someone else’s achievements, this violates the rank-order principle, and will exhibit itself in the constellation. Equity refers to the existence of an exact balance in what one gives to a system – in this case, an organization - and what one takes from it. Belonging means that everyone who belongs to a system has equal right and respect to do so. It goes against some classical ideas about who is important and unimportant in an organization, and about how leaving the organization should be treated. For example, we have noticed that, when employees have been terminated inappropriately, this inappropriate act has an unconscious effect on current employees, even on the ones who were recently recruited and have never physically met those people. And because of this unconscious influence they still belong to the organization until an appropriate act is introduced which neutralizes the influence of the previous act (Gomez, 2007:232).

Research on Systemic Constellations in organizations can be placed in the fields of organizational development, human resources management and organizational decision-making. In his doctoral thesis, Roevens (2008) describes how to conduct a Systemic Constellation, what the role of the researcher is and the goal of the research, as well as his personal path, his views, insights and struggles with the topic since 2001, by utilizing auto-ethnography, which is a typical method for phenomenological inquiry. In 2001 academic publications about Systemic Constellations in organizations where virtually inexistent. Roevens’ aim was to describe and to evaluate the Systemic Constellation perspective in organizations as precisely as possible, by remaining close to the phenomenological character of the perspective, which is different from the more positivistic epistemology of most standard research. And in order to present a thesis that can be evaluated also by those who have not experienced Systemic Constellations, he adopted the epistemology of “social constructionism” as espoused by the TAOS-Tilburg Research program under the auspices of emeritus professors Kenneth Gergen and John Rijsman.

Roevens applied the methodology of participant observation, where he made a 360° turn of all roles related to Systemic Constellations, namely as a client, as a representative, as an observer, as a researcher, and as a lecturer, staying close to phenomenology, and close to social constructionism as a particular way of conducting research in the social sciences. Roevens combined different types of research methods to establish a portfolio of persuasive evidence, which would allow readers unfamiliar with the perspective to gain an understanding of its viability and worth.

Phenomenology (Audi, 1999) cannot be captured in a well-defined and agreed set of philosophical statements. It is better understood as a series of ideas, and as a movement that has developed in different directions across time. It is associated with the thought of Husserl, Kant, Merleau-Ponty, Scheler, von Hartmann, Heidegger and Sartre. Phenomenology is suspicious of the beliefs and practices handed down to us by our culture. It seeks to penetrate beyond received explanations of the world to get at something more authentic within human experience. As Bastalich (2007, p.2) writes, “interpretive researchers seek to distinguish between something that is culturally inherited, and, as a result, perhaps one-dimensional, predictable or ‘stale’, and something in our
experience that is ‘authentic’, ‘rich’ and ‘fresh’.” Crotty (1988) describes the tenets that the members of the phenomenological movement share:

- It calls for us to get back to the things themselves, to arrive at more immediate meanings by allowing for a direct experience of the objects of our perception;
- It seeks to offer a meaningful reflection on the nature of our world – not a subjective or arbitrary account of phenomenon;
- It talks about primordial phenomenon, ‘immediate, original data of our consciousness’, phenomena in their unmediated and original manifestation to consciousness, the importance of ‘not being blinded by mental barriers, preconceptions and habits’, and having a ‘fresh perception of the world prior to acculturation’;
- It understands that cultural concepts narrow, delimit, and prevent a richer, fresher experience. Culture stands between what we see, hear, feel, smell, taste or imagine;
- It is a critical paradigm – it questions what we take for granted in order to construct new understandings.

Aladro (2009:84) states that, “there seems to be a basic tendency for members of the same group to somehow ‘belong’ to each other, and to ‘depend’ on one other. They do not need to think about what is appropriate for them to do; a hidden force entices them in that direction. If group members do not dedicate absolutely all their efforts to the benefit of the group, they will feel bad, they will feel guilty. This feeling drives them to change their behavior, and to reorient it to the well-being of the whole group.” Hellinger (2010) has also witnessed this type of behavior for achieving success in organizations and in organizational consulting.

3. Methodology and results of Systemic Constellations.

Participant observation can be defined as “a set of research strategies which aim to gain familiarity with a given group of individuals, in this case, Systemic Constellation practitioners, representatives, clients, readers, founding figures, skeptics, newcomers, researchers, etc. and their practices through an intensive involvement with them in their natural environment, often over an extended period of time.” (Roevens, 2008: 26) These strategies may involve the use of observation, as well as formal and informal interviews with other participants. Roevens’ doctoral thesis (2008) includes formal interviews with more than 20 Systemic Constellation professionals of different nationalities, an autoethnography, observation reports of specific Systemic Constellations in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Germany and the UK, and a quantitative study with a standardized questionnaire in co-operation with Tilburg University.

A concept which may help to understand the strength and novelty of a Systemic Constellation is what constellators call “representative awareness”, namely, the capacity for representatives to perceive relationships in a constellation. Roevens states that “the body works as a radar that perceives characteristics of a system purely by its position” (2008: 33). Hellinger (2001) talks about *Fremdgefühle*, literally “sensations alien to us”. A representative can experience feelings, and sometimes even heavy emotions, which are not his own, and also an inner movement, an inclination to go somewhere, or tension in the muscles, or a sudden nausea, or sentences that he wishes to utter, and/or images that come up in the mind. Frequently members of the audience, who often surround, and observe the constellation, perceive elements of the system in their bodies. Jan Jacob Stam, an internationally respected constellator who heads the Bert Hellinger Institute in the Netherlands, describes systemic energy as the type of energy that belongs to a system as a whole, which is connected with it, and which comes out of its collective unconscious. It is different from an individual’s energy (Roevens, 2008: 33).
In the configuration of an Organizational Constellation, a person can experience the inter-relational processes of his organization, from the existing problems to possible solutions, first as an external observer and later as a direct participant, occupying his own place in the “image of (re)solution”. The set-up of the system displays the strengths and weaknesses of the system to the representatives, to the observers and to the client. In this way old systemic truths as well as new possibilities come up. The whole group first experiences the dynamics of the current, problematic set-up, and later experiences the set-up of a solution. When in the end representatives express agreement with the set-up of the solution, while the client occupies his place, the whole group can get to a new sense of social relations as offered by the issues. (Gomez, 2005)

It is important to understand the mental state that the facilitator of the Systemic Constellation needs to adopt, which Hellinger (2001: 44) calls phenomenological, and which some practitioners also call “the empty middle”. It is a state in which the facilitator is interested to show reality here and now, and to promote solutions without looking for causal explanations, or generalizable truths. The facilitator’s state has 6 characteristics:
1. in contact with systemic energy without being overwhelmed by it,
2. committed to a solution,
3. allowing everyone their destiny,
4. not-knowing and trusting the Constellation,
5. in accord both with those included and with those excluded, both with victims and with perpetrators,
6. capable to differentiate between personal issues and those of a client.

While reviewing the existing literature on the subject of how one gains knowledge from setting up a Constellation, we asked ourselves “how do we know”, a question which was already asked by the great philosophers and psychologists, and which still does not have a conclusive answer. We can also look for exogenous literature, for example, in the fields of social psychology and sociology with topics such as obedience to authority, group dynamics, and the social effects of others on performance. Within the fields of organizational behavior and organizational development, we can find a plethora of group techniques, such as T-groups (also called encounter groups), Gestalt, psychodrama, bio-energetics, role theory and others. All of those sources have some elements in common with systemic constellations, as well as major differences, so that it seemed appropriate to study constellations as something in itself, as something novel, rather than to compare it with other perspectives (Roevens, 2008).

Epistemologically, the systemic constellations perspective in organizations, shows us that:
1. An organization is not an empty slate, which can every time start from scratch, irrespective of its history.
Even if many managers, and their consultants, have wished to “shake off” some displeasing elements of an organization’s past, by simply restructuring, rebranding or introducing new management, this shaking off does not, and cannot occur. The past has to be dealt with appropriately.
2. Whoever belongs to an organization depends more on a systemic psychological connection than on a ‘rational’ enumeration of the so-called stakeholders.
3. There exist systemic limits of what an organization or an individual in an organization can do. This goes against some popular management thinking, such as “everything is possible with enough imagination and will-power”.
4. Systemic limits help to focus an organization and its members, on doing activities that will have maximum results, and on avoiding actions that will not be beneficial, even if they are desired by some.
Systemic Constellations also offer new methodological perspectives in the field of sociology. They combine well with Watzlawick’s axioms of human communication (Gomez, 2005), where what is written or spoken, is complemented by non-verbal meta-communication based on relational aspects (Watzlawick, 1985). As Sparrer (2007) states, the systemic perspective is not so much about applying a particular way of thinking, but rather about embodying and experiencing a specific relational field, or context, about a specific organization while setting up a Constellation. The logic behind the perspective of Systemic Constellations while facilitating them is based on evaluating specific actions to take in order to get a clearer image of what is currently happening in the organization in the “here and now”, without rushing the process, so that the client can take in each “image of solution” as the Constellation develops (Stam, 2007). These images provide results which can be evaluated immediately, or often much later on.

In his doctoral thesis, Gomez (2005) describes 28 cases, from a total of 32 studied, where Systemic Constellations are used as a social intervention. Three different contexts were selected: research, therapy, and education. Similar behavior was observed amongst individual participants in all three contexts. This makes us conclude that the Systemic Constellations perspective can be applied as a method of social intervention, irrespective of its context. The results were obtained with a questionnaire worked-out with ISO 9000 terminology, which suited our research interests and is accepted world-wide, and which measured change in beliefs, convictions and levels of satisfaction of participants. In his doctoral thesis Gomez (2005) describes these changes in perspective about work-relations, with more than 350 research subjects, as a result of engaging in a Systemic Constellation.

In the Systemic Constellations that we analyzed four parties were always involved: the facilitator, the client who introduces a question, the representatives and the observers who sit around the Constellation. A questionnaire was filled out by the client, by the representatives and by the observers right before the client’s Constellation was set up, immediately after the Constellation was finished, and also one month after.

Graph1 displays the results of the topic “Beliefs about solving work-related problems” for the three contexts studied: research, where Gomez was constellator, therapy, where someone else was constellator, and education, where again someone else was constellator. The results show that participating in a Systemic Constellation as client, a representative or an observer produces positive change in one’s belief-system about being able to solve work-related problems. This positive change intensifies over time.

The data obtained before setting up the Constellation, showed that 42% were certain that their work-related problems would be solved, 42% believed it was possible, and 16% believed it was not possible. After completing the Constellation, 74% stated that they were certain that their work-related problems would be solved, and 26% believed it was possible. One month later, 78% stated that they were certain that their work-related problems would be solved, and 22% believed it was possible. The results show that the participants in the different contexts, and with the different roles assigned to them, change their belief significantly relative to the same questions posed before and after the Constellation, and they moderately increase these opinions in favor of the solutions that the Constellations showed them. There are modest differences between the results of the clients, who had their Constellation set up, and the observers, as the latter’s score can be situated in between the pre- and post- situation of the clients. Still in all cases there is a change of belief, in
favor of seeing a solution. Still, some authors, such as Manne (2010), claim that “Constellations hold the same beneficial effects for clients, representatives and observers. This may be surprising, but still it is something universally acknowledged”. A Constellation has an effect on the total system of an organization, it affects all its members, not just the person who put the change in motion, by setting up a constellation. Representatives experience the systemic organizational knowledge that the persons that they represent also experience. And observers also benefit from observing particular organizational dynamics, which can be found universally in all types of organizations, thus increasing their general knowledge of human organizations.

Graph1 : Beliefs about solving work-related problems in three contexts

(This graph is a copy of an original in Spanish. Here are translations: seguro si = definitely yes; posbte si = likely yes; posbte no = likely no; seguro no = definitely no; de casos = number; antes = before; despues = after; mes despues = one month after; grupo = for the whole group)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several conclusions can be made about the effectiveness of Systemic Constellations in organizations, primarily based on how both researchers, Gomez and Roevens, embodied various roles as Participant Observers: observer, representative, client, constellator, and academic. Participant Observation has one particular benefit: the researcher does not have to claim that he is a neutral, objective observer, but rather that he is someone who delves into the subject matter that he is studying by becoming an active member of the community of people involved in that particular kind of work. As the phenomenon was studied in its natural environment, the research findings hold high ecological validity. A typical critique about Participant Observation is that the researcher looks at reality blurred by his own perceptions, and therefore only renders a biased selective perception. One way to limit the impact of personal bias, is to acknowledge it. In his diary Roevens (2008) openly stated his own assumptions and reflections, and working from the epistemology of social constructionism (Gergen, 1985), does not make any claims to full objectivity, but rather to a large amount of inter-subjectivity, by comparing his own findings about constellations with those of others studying it.

A phenomenological attitude may be the most effective and honest attitude to study the various techniques used with Systemic Constellations. This attitude invites you to attune your awareness to
a field of very subtle observation, something with which humanity has occasionally been involved, and with various levels of intensity. This is sometimes hard to understand by those who have never experienced a phenomenological attitude. It seems appropriate to quote Nietzsche here, “and those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.” If you have never sensed Constellation energy, you will consider those who do Constellations as engaging in rather bizarre ritualistic behavior.

Systemic Constellations offer new perspectives and novel opportunities to tackle organizational problems. The various authors studied agree that a limitation of their work is that they have not applied only one specific method in detail, which could then easily be replicated by another researcher. Still, from a phenomenological point of view it is impossible to “step in the same river twice”, to paraphrase Heraclitus. A Constellation that was set up on September 15, 2005, of a particular organization, cannot be replicated on September 15, 2006, as the organization will have changed. Moreover, from the epistemological perspective of social constructionism it is not possible, to prove objective cause-and-effect relations of Constellations. It is, however, possible to provide research in the form of a portfolio of persuasive evidence, which is as robust as possible, and methodologically varied, always in dialogue with others researching the same subject, and always ready to falsify any claims that the study may make. In reference to Popper we therefore also talk about the heuristics of the Constellation’s perspective, rather than of laws, or of certainties.

Our research shows that organizations behave according to specific systemic heuristics. This means that one has to be able to take decisions that seem appropriate according to the Systemic Constellation and which may differ from what seems appropriate according to a specific morality, or to a specific cultural perspective, such as, for example, the perspectives of organizational development, or, of economics. A Systemic Constellation focuses on what is possible in the current situation, and not on discussions about what should be. Faced with organizational reality, interpretations of what should or should not be, have little value.

To be a constellator one needs training. To participate in a Constellation either as client, representative or observer, one only needs the will to resolve problems in one’s organization and also a willingness to accept systemic order and hierarchy in an organization, to recognize respectfully what happened in the past, sometimes even verbally, to include what was excluded, to respect the organization and feel gratitude towards it, and to accept that the organization belongs to something bigger than our own mental constructions about it.

When the client first sets up a Systemic Constellation about an issue relating to his organization, the constellator - and sometimes also the representatives and/or the observers - perceives an image which can be an externalization of the internal image of the client. This externalization already puts in motion a change dynamic. While working with the Constellation and varying its set-up, new images may surface, which hold more constructive roles for the organization’s members. The symbolic place that someone holds within a social group, or within an organization determines not only how he feels, but more importantly how he acts. This new perspective of working with Systemic Constellations gives individuals the chance to physically experiment with trying out and embodying different places inside an organization, as set up through the Constellation, and discovering which place gives them the biggest capacity of being of service to the organization.

As an epilogue, let us leave you with some questions for further research in Systemic Constellations:
What is personal and what is systemic in a constellation?
What are some systemic heuristics?
How come specific representatives are always selected to represent a similar role?
Should a constellator have specific qualities to do the work well?
Are there cultural differences in the use of constellations?
How can we understand free will and determinism?

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