

Family Constellations with Musical Instruments

A Phenomenological Systemic Approach as it applies in Music Therapy

Abstract

Music therapy as one of the methods used in depth psychology enters new dimension by taking a systemic perspective. In this presentation I demonstrate how I am applying the Phenomenological Systemic Approach to Family Constellations in individual music therapy. In this process musical instruments are chosen to represent each member of the family, and then placed in relation to one another. This reveals in the inner image that the patient hold about his/her family, a dynamic, which is "made audible" by playing the instruments. Working with the constellations of instruments often leads to suprising changes in their play. As each instrument finds resolution, a sense of piece emerges throughout this "musical system" and patients often find new ways of resolving their lives..

This approach is appropriated for individual music therapy for the purpose of exploring the background of the existing dynamic in the patients family and for clarifying therapeutic goals. It can also be used in systemic counselling and supervision.

Keywords: Musical Instruments as Symbols and Representatives - Phenomenological Systemic Constellations

Background and Method

We see the roots of Family Constellation in the systemic approach to psychotherapy, which goes further than singular or dyadic ways of thinking. The individual person is always considered as a part of systems like the origin family, the present family, professional teams, private clubs etc. The human being exists in patterns of relationship, which impress his potentialities of feeling and acting. Systemic psychotherapy considers those patterns to be important for a better understanding of the patient in these connections and for finding solutions for his problems. The systemic approach will more and more influence psychotherapy – and therefore also music therapy.

The phenomenological systemic approach, discovered by Bert Hellinger, is not focusing on the separate subject or Ego but on the game of forces, in which the individual person takes part. Years of experience with Family Constellation made it clear, that the potentialities of single men or women often are very much reduced by being entangled in transpersonal connections, that means concretely: in the fates of persons belonging to their origin family – sometimes over several generations.

In the Family Constellations can be observed, how people unconsciously are playing the roles of foregoing members of their families, who were treated heavily unjust. In other cases, men or women are confronted with the early death of their mother, father, sister or brother. A part of them rests with such a dead person and wants to follow him or her. This can lead to serious disease or even suicide. In any way they are bound to the past and can not really focus their attention on present partners and children. In both cases the people are not able to fulfill their own individual live and fate.

However, when these facts can consciously be seen in a constellation, the patients are able to seek for solutions which allow them to find their own way of growing. Hellinger found a basic order in families by working a long time with constellations. Here are the most important points:

1. a hierarchy of time, that means: the foregoing have the precedence of the posteriors;
2. an attitude against the parents which is basically not thankful but accusing (even if there are good reasons) leads to unconscious punishing oneself;
3. the completeness: all persons are allowed to belong to the system;
4. the compensation by the effect of the conscience;
5. the dynamics of vicarious suffering, and the renunciation of this as a good solution for all (Madelung, in: Weber 2000a:44f).

The original method has shortly to be explained first, because the integration in music therapy is basing on it. From a group of other patients the patient chooses representatives for mother, father, sisters/brothers and for himself. It might be necessary, that other persons of the system later join the constellation, especially those whose fate is important by whatever reasons, for example: grandparents, uncles/aunts, brothers or sisters who died by miscarriage or abortion,

persons about whom nobody speaks like children who are illegitimate and/or given away, grown-up members which are not respected, former partners of the parents, who were treated bad etc. We will hear more about that in the case studies.

By body contact the patient moves the representatives in their positions, so that it becomes visible in which direction they are looking. This reveals the inner image which the patient holds about his family. In this way he creates a kind of field in which the representatives feel like the persons they represent. Sometimes they even have body sensations of those persons without having any information about them. These phenomena can not yet be explained by science, but anybody can make these experiences without a need for special talents.

Solutions can be found as follows: either the therapist experiments by changing the positions of the representatives or the representatives themselves follow their intuition and change to where they are attracted. This process lasts until everybody in the constellation is feeling good. I would like to compare this with the tuning of an instrument. In this case a system is “tuned”.

You finally get two images: one image of the problem, which allows a deep psychological diagnosis, as well as another image for the solution, which informs you about the therapeutic goals.

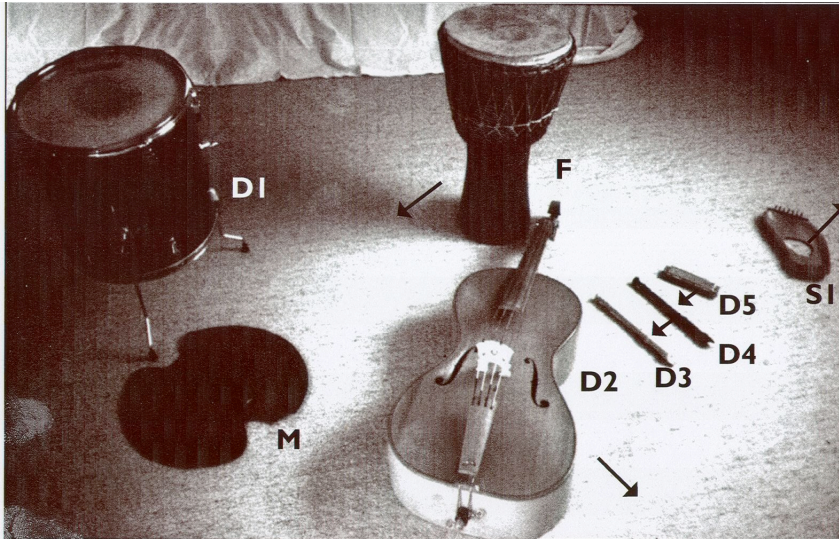
Working with such constellations is normally done with groups. In music therapy the client chooses persons as representatives and musical instruments for them. In the following improvisation all the representatives can play together at the same time, so that you can hear the sound of the system (Timmermann 2001, 2003). For to use the method in single therapy with adults or children therapists started working with symbols, for example: small stones, pairs of shoes or toy figures. In music therapy consequently musical instruments represent the members of the system. They are chosen and placed to each other with care – the family as a band!

In this way you will get two levels: The position of the instruments in the system is the most important and you have to ask for the direction, in which each one is looking. But also the symbolic character of the instruments can inform a skilled music therapist about the patient's view on members of his family, for example: the gong is mighty, a flute small but shrill, a violin was the instrument of a sister who died young by an accident, and so on.

In single music therapy the patient can play the positioned instrument to get a feeling for the place of someone in his family and express it with its special sound. In group music therapy representatives can be chosen to play, in an improvisation you get the sound of the whole.

Case study: Helene

The first case study demonstrates the effect of concealment relative to a member of the system. Helene worked with my wife and me in several group sessions with music and breath therapy. One day she called us and asked for a single session on the theme “I am not be seen. I can not defend myself.” We invited her for a constellation of her origin family.



Helene 01

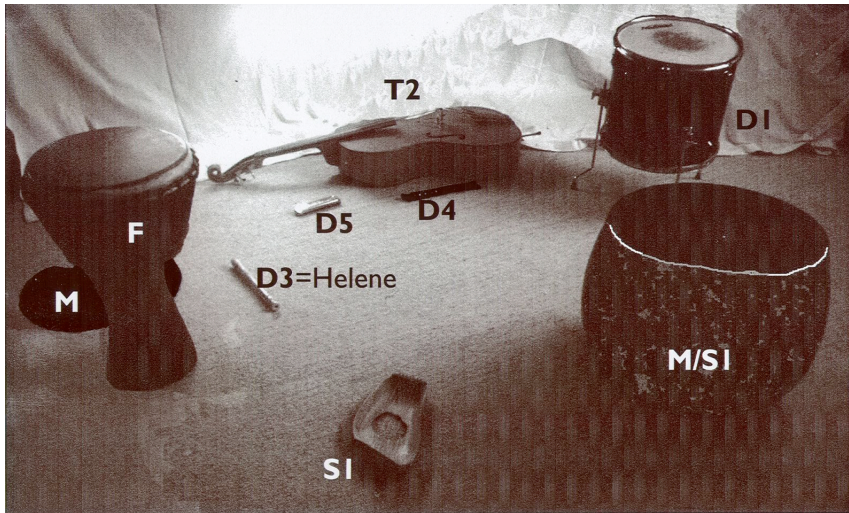
Illustration Helene 1

On the first illustration you see her mother represented by a broken chinese cymbalin; she is all fixed up to herself. The second child and eldest daughter (drum) imitates that and is close to her. The father (dschembe) looks to his wife, but she does not answer to his view. The second daughter (bass) looks out of the system (we do not know to whom, mostly in such a case a person looks for somebody who is dead and wants to follow him). “Helen” is the third daughter. She represents herself with a flute, just like her twin sister, who is suffering from a psychosis since many years. These two are looking to each other. A fifth daughter (mouth organ) is looking to them. On the right finally there is the eldest, a brother, represented by a lyre, whom she describes as very problematic. He is also looking out of the system and we will soon recognize, for whom he is looking.

Being asked for more informations about him, we get to know, that her father, before he married her mother, had a secret love-affair with a maid-servant of the family, who got pregnant and gave birth to this son. The family ordered that the maid-servant had to be satisfied with money and had to be sent away. Nobody had ever heard anything about her and nobody talked about her.

When we asked Helene to choose an instrument which could represent that woman, spontaneously she placed the big temple bell in the constellation. Later she realized, that this had always been her favorite instrument in the group sessions! The mighty sound had fascinated and impressed her deeply. This big and intensive instrument now represented a

woman who was not been seen in the visible reality of the family, unconsciously however she had a very great power and influence on the psychological situation in it.



Helene 02

Illustration Helene 2

From the moment she was taken into the constellation the whole situation changed. Helene put her father and mother together, they now can be a couple for her, and she can be near to them. Her brother finds its place between his mother and his father, in this way he can be a part of the system.

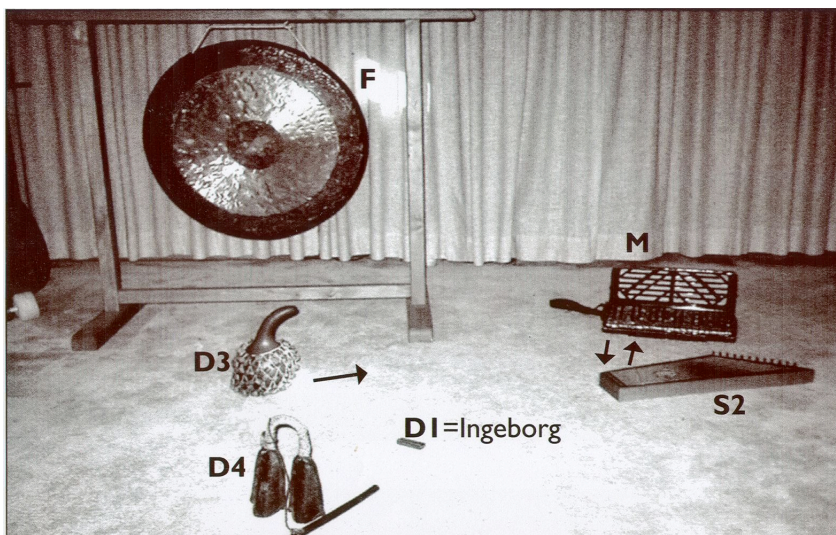
Helene's theme "I am not be seen. I cannot defend myself" really makes sense now. She is identified with the mother of her eldest brother, who was sent away and concealed, who was not able to defend herself, lost her child and could not be seen by him and the family.

This unjust treatment had to be compensated by the family's unconsciousness. Helene identified herself with the situation of that woman while her twin sister got crazy. The solution of this conflict is, that she – vicarious for those who are responsible – values her, gives her a place in the system and in her heart. We invite her to play a music for that woman and after that she feels very good. The next day she gives us a call telling us that she feels better than ever, lightened and really happy.

Case study: Ingeborg

Ingeborg, a fiftythree years old teacher, had long years of experience with psychotherapy suffering from depressions. To music therapy she was sent because of an acute problem with her voice: she was not able to speak loud and clear. For me it felt like "not being allowed to say something". I supposed there was a kind of secret in the past family and asked her to set it up with instruments.

Ingeborg felt small and not being noticed She choosed the smallest mouth organ from my collection for to represent herself.

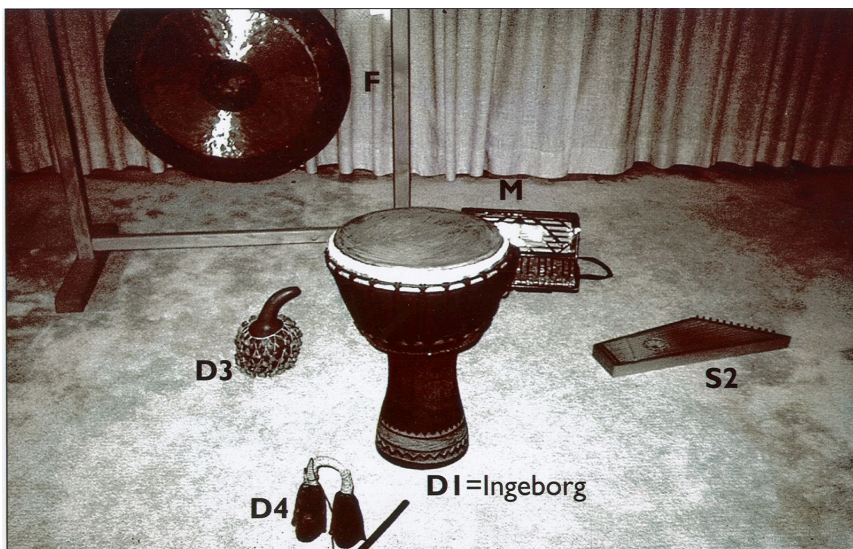


Ingeborg 01

Illustration Ingeborg 1

In the image of her origin system I first noticed the narrow relationship between mother and son. I asked for the parents of her mother. She told me that her grandfather died, when her mother was eleven years old and that her brother looks very much like him. When she told that, Ingeborg suddenly got very fury, which I suppose to be the more easier feeling than mourning about the lack of relationship between her and her mother.

Her mother had not overcome the early death of her father and carried this over to her son. Therefore Ingeborg's father could not perceive his wife and Ingeborg could not perceive her mother. On the other side: her father's father died, when he was ten years old. So he had not had enough of his father as being an example or model how to become a man. Therefore he was not able to keep the attention and attraction of his wife for him. In such cases the view often goes to dead persons of the system instead of the living ones. In this image he is not really able to be a husband for his wife and a father to his children.



Ingeborg 02

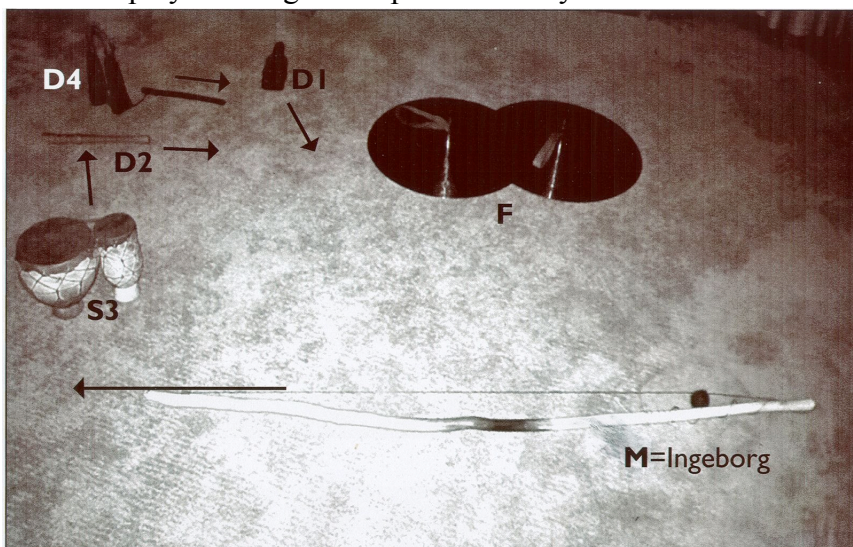
Illustration Ingeborg 2

I offered a change and put the mother beside the father. In this way Irene has the impression of them as being a couple. In the depth of her soul this image is right; every child is the result of its parents as a couple, even if they could not hold on to this because of their own fates.

In the moment I did this, she drew a deep breath, felt a big lightening and a lot of inner space. Spontaneously she brang back the little mouth organ, got herself a big african drum (dschembe) and started playing it loudly. In this moment she was able to take her place as the eldest of the children in the family. After that her voice was much louder and clearer. She did not remark it consciously and was astonished when I drew her attention to that point.

We made another date of two hours in a fortnight.

This time she felt much more cheerful and lightened. We played an improvisation on the theme “Without intention”. While playing she felt, that the liveliness of her inner child is blocked up by thinking of her present family. I offered her to set it up.



Ingeborg 03

Illustration Ingeborg 3

In this image too the husband has got no wife. She is leaving by looking outside the visible system. The children have no orientation. Since now only the youngest daughter has no psychopathological problems: the son suffers from depressions and the other daughter from a psychosis.

After the second world war her husband, as a very young child, was driven away with his parents and two brothers from East Germany (now Poland). Expulsion and all kinds of “ethnic purge” always are a big trauma which influences also the following generations. In this case I did not explore exactly the context, but it is conspicuous that, by the wish of their mother, all three brothers should become catholic priests. Only Ingeborg`s husband refused, and so, only by him life goes on in this family. I suppose however that he has unconsciously strong feelings of guilt against his mother and a deep fear of the “castrating woman”. So he is not able to really take the luck of living in his family.

The weekend after the last session Ingeborg and her husband had gone jogging together for the first time since long. It seemed to her, that a solution is possible. By breathing and playing the drum loudly she experienced with her senses, that power and liveliness are sleeping inside herself, and that she can not deny this chances. When she can allow herself this and turn awards her husband it will be a big lightening for the children. The burden, the depressive heaviness can make room for more detachment and being more free and easy like a child.

Result

The phenomenological systemic approach and method helped me to find a holistic view on the patient`s situation. In a rather short time a diagnosis of the conflict and possible solutions can be made visible and hearable. It depends on the patient`s psychopathology and his state of development in the therapeutic process how much time must be spent furthermore in working with him.

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