

MODULE TWO Study Guide - Conscience and Bonding

In this module, we look at two concepts: conscience and bonding, and how they are related. To set the foundation of a good discussion about conscience, we must first understand a few universal basic needs, as taught by Bert Hellinger. The first and most vital is the need to belong, or the need for bonding. The second basic need is to maintain a balance of giving and taking, that is, for equilibrium. The third is the need for the safety of social convention and predictability, that is, for order.

These, according to Hellinger, could be thought of as biological needs. As primary needs, these are driven by instinct and help ensure our survival. Systemic and Family Constellations Therapy shows us how none of these needs can be avoided or bypassed without consequences.

Raised in the Catholic faith, Hellinger saw conscience as a perceptual organ for systemic balance. He saw it as an indicator as to whether or not a person is in harmony with his or her reference system; there to warn us if what we are about to do carries the consequence of being excluded from the system. A clear conscience, he said, only means that the person can feel entitled to continue to belong to his or her group, and a guilty conscience means that the person's place or standing in the group might be at risk.

Bonding

“Bonding is like a deep magnetic force that pulls us towards someone. It is healthy, life affirmative and part of our capacity as humans is to be able to surrender to such a force. But to remain under its influence is also limiting, as it also creates separation and duality, and prevents us from being open to the whole.”

- Svagito Liebermeister

Human children require a lot of care and attention before they are able to function independently in the world. In order to make sure that children get this care and attention, nature created a strong bond between the child and his or her parents, particularly the mother.

Bonding has been shown to release hormones and chemicals responsible for brain growth. Along with the development of the brain comes the rapid development of the emotional and mental life of a child, so bonding affects us physically as well as psychologically.

As one of Hellinger's students Svagito Liebermeister explains it, imitation or assimilation are the infant's first and most primitive ways of learning and through imitation, the bonding a child feels and his sense of belonging are strengthened. His whole personality structure develops around values that he absorbs from his family environment and those who are closest to him.

We later also form bonds to our father, to siblings and other members of the family. Eventually we form bonds to friends, lovers, and partners, but the bond to our original family seems to remain strongest, probably because it relates to an unconscious sense that we need our family in order to survive.

Like Bonds to Like

“Children accommodate without question to the groups into which they are born, and they bond to those groups with a tenacity reminiscent of imprinting. Young children experience their bonding to their family as love and good fortune, no matter how the family nourishes or neglects them, and they experience their family’s values and habits as good, no matter what the family believes or does.”

- Bert Hellinger

Children act as if love could tolerate no difference—as if only being similar would bond them [children with their parents] together and that being different must lead to separation and loss. Their actions bear witness to the magical thinking of the child’s soul: “Like bonds to like.”

This unconscious assumption about love gives rise to a child’s instinctive urge to bond to the parents by being like them. Acting out of love, children follow their parents even in suffering, and although it’s usually unconscious, they perpetuate their parents’ misfortunes by copying them.

Children unconsciously aspire to equal their parents in suffering. Their bonding love is so deep that it blinds them, and they can’t resist the temptation to try to care for their parents by taking on their parents’ suffering. Although acting out of love and believing that they are doing good, they begin to function as their parents’ parents, and they live out their parents’ greatest fears by damaging themselves. Their blind love protects their bonding to their parents, but by functioning as parents and trying to give to their parents rather than take from them, they reverse the flow of giving and taking and they inadvertently perpetuate suffering.

Collective Bonding

Although the most important bonds are with our original family (including members from past generations), we also form bonds to social groups. Family and Systemic Constellations have been particularly revealing about how family members of past generations belong to the relational field of our family and can continue to have astonishing influences on our behavior, our feelings and our whole life. This means that bonding is not limited to the people we consciously know, but we also bond to others from past generations that we have never personally met or seen.

Bonding isn’t what we thought - The price of belonging

“The bonding and belonging so necessary for our survival and well-being also dictate what we may perceive, believe, and know.”

- Bert Hellinger

On a deep unconscious level, there seems to exist a collective matrix or energy field that binds families, members of a culture, religion or country together and this energy works equally on all those who belong to that group. Belonging to a family, a partner, a political group, a religious or spiritual group, a company or association gives us a sense of identity and safety. Knowing where we belong, identifying with certain beliefs and creeds, attaching ourselves to those who are important to us seems to give us strength and stability in a changing world. It provides us with a false sense of knowing who we are.

Bonding Manifesting as Collective Trauma

Bonding, as it turns out, is also the cause of conflict and even wars. Under its influence, we take over the feelings of others, we feel guilty for the deeds of people we do not know personally, we are driven to act on behalf of those who are already dead and may take revenge for atrocities that did not happen to us, without considering if we have any right to do so. Collective shame or guilt is a consequence not of a personal experience, but because we feel part of a family or social group or country. Then the guilt or shame we feel is not related to our own action, but they arise because of what our family members or even our ancestors have done. We feel a certain shared responsibility that is a consequence of our sense of belonging.

Through the work of constellations, countless cases have presented themselves in which the descendants of those who were tortured or victimized in the past, carry a feeling of wanting revenge. Or the descendants of perpetrators carry a deep sense of guilt that they seek to atone for in their lives. Through bonding, one can feel directly involved in the events that happened to a previous generation without any direct personal experience.

To effectively address these issues, we need to understand what bonding is and how it affects us as individuals. And as we move through this material, we begin to see how relationships can exist with or without strong bonding, but also bonding can exist outside of any close relationship.

Entanglement

According to Hellinger, evil is mostly a function of systemic entanglements. Any family member can become blindly entangled in other members' debts and privileges; in their thoughts, cares, and feelings; and in their conflicts or goals.

Entanglement may be the cause when a person has unexplained difficulty in talking with another, or reacts in an inexplicable way—as if he or she were influenced by invisible conflicts and anxieties. People who are fanatic about being right are often entangled. When they “fight” with exaggerated bitterness and vehemence, they may well be representing someone else in the system. If there's a scapegoat in the present family, it's often the case that there was a scapegoat in a previous generation, and it's useful to look for it carefully.

The persons drafted for this service don't choose their fate. In fact, they usually don't even notice what's happening and can't defend themselves against it. They relive the fate of the excluded person, and recreate that person's experience, complete with the guilt, the innocence, and all of the other feelings that belong to that experience.

The tendency of a family to balance itself by matching tragedy at one point with tragedy at another can be avoided when members are willing to seek balance at a higher level—for example, by honoring the excluded members instead of repeating their mistakes. This is possible if the younger members take from earlier members what they give, and if they respect the earlier members, regardless of their actions. At some point the past, whether good or tragic, must be allowed to be past in order for the system to find peace.

It requires great discipline to extract yourself from systemic entanglements, and to release everything that deserves to be finished. All members of a family group must let go of things, both positive and negative, as soon as their effect for good is past.

In one constellation case where the father in the family had a mistress, the mother “sucked it up” and pretended everything was okay. She “acted nice,” so as to not cause more problems in the family, which was already feeling the stress of the infidelity. Hellinger pointed out, We might be tempted to call a mother’s behavior commendable, but it was false innocence and its effect was destructive. Unknowingly entangled in her parents’ problem, the daughter avenged the injustice done to her mother by punishing her own husband for her father’s deed, but she also demonstrated her love for her father by acting exactly as he had acted. She treated her husband as her father had treated her mother. The better resolution would have been for the mother to have confronted her husband with her anger. Then he would have had to make a decision, and they could have either come to a mutual agreement or made a clean separation.

Identification

Identification is one way that entanglements show up in family systems. It is a strange, almost uncanny phenomenon, like a systemic repetition compulsion. It attempts to recreate the past in order to bring justice to an excluded person. But such justice is primitive and blind, and it brings no resolution. In this dynamic, later persons become entangled in the destiny of an earlier person, and the injustice is passed on from generation to generation.

People who are identified with an ancestor have the ancestor’s feelings—for example, the feeling of not having a place, or not having a right to belong. Parentification among children is often an indicator that a child is identified with an ancestor. Does the child hold him or herself responsible for a parent’s inner condition? Do they try to give what a parent or partner may give, but what a child may not give? For example, do they think or feel, “If I do this, my mother will get ill,” or, “If I don’t do that, my father will leave us?” These are all examples of identification.

Another’s guilt and tragedy may sometimes appear easier to master than one’s own, but taking on someone else’s tragedy is inappropriate and creates no life-affirming energy. A later person can’t set something in order for an earlier person after the fact, even if their actions are motivated by love. If misfortune is to be useful in developing strength, it must be returned to the person to whom it belongs, and he or she must be trusted to endure it.

In a constellation, this identification becomes immediately clear when the person representing the child starts to feel nervous and fidgety. If the person with whom that person is identified is brought into the system—for instance, the missing grandmother or partner—the child immediately becomes calm.

When a child identifies with an opposite sex ancestor, it becomes difficult for that child to develop a clear sense of him or herself as the gender that he or she is. When an ex-lover or partner has not been given their proper place, a child will sometimes identify with them. The solution would be for the client to claim their own parent by saying to the excluded one, while pointing to their own father or mother, *S/He is the right one for me.* And then to say to his or her father, *You are the right one for me, and I'll have nothing more to do with that other person.* Then the client can return to the position of a child with two parents, and can separate from the ex-lover or partner. The identification, or pressure to relive his or her fate could then dissolve.

Children unconsciously identify with older relatives

"Injuries to the order of love by earlier members of a family affect the lives of later members, just as the waves and ripples in a river caused by a submerged boulder upstream still twist and swell far downstream."

- Bert Hellinger

When children fear becoming like their parents, they constantly watch their parents, because whatever they don't wish to be like they must continually observe. It's no wonder then that they become exactly like their parents.

In some cases, it is also important to examine in what way one has unconsciously contributed to the traumatic event, or even created it. We know from systemic work that sometimes children are identified with former family members and have a wish to die in order to save another family member. As a consequence, they unconsciously seek situations that endanger their life or well-being. Unless the unconscious bonds that are at the root of tragic events are also examined and one is not only focused on physiological healing, the danger is that similar situations will be endlessly recreated.

Suicide is another red flag for identification. When there are many serious illnesses, frequent accidents, deaths or suicides in a family, the client can unconsciously want to die or commit suicide, or has a feeling that he needs to die young in order to follow all of those who have gone before. This dynamic often shows up among very young children, and should not be brushed aside or dismissed.

In such cases, the dynamic is called, *Better I go than you, dear Father, or dear Mother.* There is nothing that can be done to prevent illness or death that has already occurred. The question is whether or not we can do anything for the surviving family members. The survivor can often get relief when the deceased is given a place in their heart and say to him or her, *I know that you did it for me, and I carry you in my heart so that you live on in me. I'll do something good in memory of you.* And he can say to his other sons, "He has a place in my heart, and I'm asking you to give him a place in your hearts too."

Hatred is also a big red flag for identification, as hatred always reveals a very strong bond.

Collective Memory—Carrying the Burden

Some traumatic events that happened to former generations can continue to affect whole families. These can include the early death of children or of a parent, physical or psychological

illnesses of family members, accidents, murder or other crimes, or when a former family member in some way has been made an outcast by the rest of his family. There are other traumas that affect whole societies. These include events like natural disasters, mass shootings, terrorism, famines or severe poverty, wars, pandemics, religious persecution and others. Because of the bonding we feel to our family, religious or social group or country, we sometimes feel and behave as if such events have happened to us, when, in fact, they did not.

This collective memory of trauma is sometimes cultivated in certain families or cultures to create the sense of a collective self, a historical identity that provides a feeling of continuity between past, present and future. But this feeling of continuity and identity has a very high price.

There are situations where both father and mother carry so much trauma that their child feels that he wants to die. Then, sometimes only by connecting to other siblings (if there are any), or by placing a representative for life, can he feel a sense of wanting to stay alive or find any joy.

This can sometimes be seen clearly in the victim/perpetrator dynamic that we will talk about in greater depth in Module Eight. The original victims may be more open to a perpetrator than their descendants, who have become stuck in an endless cycle of wanting revenge.

If I'm identified with someone, how do I get out?

Because identifications aren't experienced consciously, following feelings doesn't provide helpful guidelines for their resolution, and learning to express feelings doesn't resolve the identification either. That means that when the problem is related to an identification or imbalance in the family, the therapist can't expect the client to be able to find a resolution on his or her own; such resolutions can only be found through conscious insight into the group dynamics.

An identification can be resolved when younger persons who are repeating the fate of earlier persons realize what the problem is. Then they can look at the shut-out person, or stand by that person and give him or her a loving place in their hearts. This love creates a relationship and then the excluded person becomes a friend, a guardian angel, a source of support. An identification is, after all, the opposite of a relationship. When I'm identified with someone, I feel and act as that person does, but I can't love the person because I don't experience him or her as different from me. I can only love someone I experience as separate from me. When I love a person as separate from me, my love dissolves any identification I might have. The identified person can then return to his or her appropriate place in the family, and the equilibrium of the system is reestablished.

Our sense of self changes when excluded members of the system are brought back into awareness. Systems are wholes, and individuals in a relationship system only feel whole when the whole system is represented in them. Whenever a member of the family succeeds in "remembering" an excluded member in his or her heart, the difference is immediately felt. The internal images of family and self become more complete, and he or she actually feels more whole.

Healing Identification

When we stand in front of someone we are identified with or unconsciously bonded to, we begin to feel this bonding love, which is already a great relief. Our tears may flow and we might start for the first time to experience how deeply we are connected to someone from our family past. Unless this love is felt and deeply experienced, no real transformation can take place. Any intellectual knowledge about unconscious identifications will not suffice. Only after this bonding love is felt and acknowledged, can one grow beyond it and love can enter a new dimension, where we recognize that we each have our own life destiny. Mature love is capable of respecting that.

Systemic Conscience Versus the Greater Conscience (Love)

"In her heart, every grandmother prefers that her grandchildren live in peace."

- Bert Hellinger

In each relationship, in each social context, we develop a conscience that, just like a barometer, tells us if we are in danger of losing our right to belong. The strength of this force depends on how important it is for us to belong to this social group or to stay in that relationship. That is why it is so important to be aware of the essential difference between authentic love and bonding. Bonding is an unconscious pull that may appear like love, but actually is more related to our need to belong to a group in order to survive and feel safe. Authentic love only arises when we become capable of loosening those bonds and can stand alone, like an outsider.

While it is true that we are biologically engineered to form and maintain relationships to ensure our survival, that is not the ultimate goal of life but rather a first lesson to learn about relating and feeling connected to the whole. Real love is acquired. It comes from doing and from experiencing one's own boundaries. We all have boundaries, in good as well as evil. Love is basically only an acknowledgement that, in spite of all our differences, we have something in common at a very deep level.

The deepest love we can experience occurs when a person is acknowledged and accepted just as he or she is, and further, when it is acknowledged that the person is necessarily this way and couldn't possibly be any other way.

– Bert Hellinger

The struggle of love against the dynamics of family systems is the beginning and the end of the greatest tragedies. The systemic laws operating within the family don't respond to a child's love. The drive for balance working in the family group is more fundamental than love, and it readily sacrifices individual love and happiness to maintain the larger family equilibrium. Extracting oneself from this battlefield requires insight into the Orders of Love, and a willingness to follow them with love.

An adult who is motivated by instinctual drives is easily seduced into assuming responsibility inappropriate to his or her position. His child love seeks balance in revenge blindly, as if more deaths could heal the emptiness left by past deaths. Peace will not return to his family until he manages to say to his ancestors with love, *Yours is a great loss. I pay homage to your*

suffering. Because I love you, I will not take up this sword, and I do you the greatest honor by entrusting your suffering to you. With you, your suffering is in better hands than with me.

Eventually our learning is to let our love grow beyond the bonding love that is simply a desire to be together, towards a higher love that arises from our inner being. Growing beyond bonding is what we are here to do.

Systemic and Family Constellations is a method that reveals the energy of bonding and shows how we are simultaneously influencing such an energy field and are also influenced by it. Systemic dynamics expressed in the field help us to increase awareness of unconscious identification and entanglements, and help remove barriers to mature, conscious love.

The Development of Conscience

“Just as the eye discriminates continually between light and dark, so too an inner organ continually discriminates between what serves and what hinders our relationships.”

- Bert Hellinger

As we grow and mature, we develop one conscience with our mother and another with our father; one for the family and another for the workplace; one for church, another for an evening out with a friend. In each of these different situations, conscience strives to guard our belonging and to protect us from abandonment and loss. It holds us to our group like a sheepdog holds the sheep together in a herd, barking and nipping at our heels until we move together with the others. But what leaves us innocent in one relationship may make us very guilty in another.

This is the way we all learn how to be a ‘good’ child, a ‘good’ student, a ‘good’ husband or wife, a ‘good’ citizen. It is called conditioning: learning the values of our family and social surroundings. It may be enforced from the outside at the beginning, but then it becomes internalized and takes the form of a conscience.

The only criteria followed by conscience acting in the service of bonding are the values of the group to which we belong. For this reason, persons who come from different groups have different values, and persons who belong to several groups act differently in each group.

Different Needs Require Different Behaviors

To make things even more complicated, conscience demands in the service of one need [belonging, balance, or order] what it forbids in the service of another, and it may allow us in the service of one what it forbids in the service of the others.

- Guilt feels like exclusion and alienation when our belonging is endangered. When our belonging is well served, we feel innocence as intimate inclusion and closeness.
- Guilt feels like indebtedness and obligation when our giving and taking are not balanced. When giving and taking are balanced, we feel innocence as entitlement and freedom.

- Guilt feels like transgression and as fear of consequences or punishment when we deviate from a social order. We feel innocence with respect to social order as conscientiousness and loyalty.

No matter how we struggle to follow our conscience, we always feel both guilt and innocence—innocence with respect to one need and guilt with respect to another. The dream of innocence without guilt is an illusion.

Belonging Demands the Exclusion of Those Who Are Different

Along the course of human development a baby, at a particular stage, is instinctively more interested in a human face than anything else. To support the creation of a strong bond towards the primary caretaker, the child also needs to learn to distinguish who is its mother and who is not. Gradually, the child will learn to distinguish his mother's face from the face of others, which is the time when children develop stranger anxiety. So, while bonding brings us together with some people, it simultaneously also separates us from others.

The conscience guarding our belonging guides us to do to those who are different what we most fear as the worst consequence of guilt—we exclude them. Thus, guilt and innocence are not the same as good and evil. We do destructive and evil things with a clear conscience when they serve the groups that are necessary for our survival, and we take constructive action with a guilty conscience when these acts jeopardize our membership in these same groups.

Conscience Comes in Three Sizes

Personal Conscience

We call the conscience that we feel as guilt or innocence a personal conscience, and it is largely variable, depending on the people we're with; it has many different standards, one for each of our different relationships. In the service of belonging, conscience reacts to everything that enhances or endangers our bonding. Guilt and innocence have the same goal. They entice us and drive us in the same direction, jealously guarding our connection to our family and intimate community.

Systemic Conscience

Just as appearances of guilt and innocence may deceive, the conscience of the group also gradually shapes the child's experience of the world. It colors the child's perception of what is with the family's beliefs.

- Bert Hellinger

Every social group creates a collective field around itself, and in order to create some awareness and clarity about this field it is essential to move out of it, at least temporarily. We easily become adapted to the social energy field we live in, and we can become part of a very limited and prejudiced worldview without even noticing.

- Svagito Liebermeister

In addition to our personal conscience: the feelings of guilt and innocence that we consciously feel in the service of bonding, the balance of giving and taking, and social convention, there's also a hidden conscience operating in our relationships that we do not feel.

Systemic Conscience applies to all of us whether we recognize it or not. We neither feel nor hear it directly, but we experience it in the form of symptoms and repeating patterns, when harm is passed from one generation to the next in the form of entanglements and identifications. It has its own basic principles and dynamics that we can learn to navigate and understand if we so desire.

This invisible Systemic Conscience, its dynamics and the *hidden natural laws* it serves are complex and mysterious, but reasonable. Above all, they are observable through a phenomenological approach most easily found through participation in Systemic and Family Constellations Therapy. According to Hellinger, the *hidden natural laws* we will be discussing in Module Four are “in part the natural forces of biology and evolution; in part, the general dynamics of complex systems becoming manifest in our intimacy; and in part, the forces of Love’s Hidden Symmetry operating within the soul.” They tell us about love and how to help restore the flow of love.

Conscience of the Greater Whole or the Greater Soul

Yet another [third] conscience guides each of us toward the Greater Whole or the Greater Soul. Following this third conscience requires great effort, perhaps even a spiritual effort, because it tears us away from obedience to the dictates of our family, religion, culture and personal identity. It demands of us, if we turn toward it, that we leave behind what we have known and find another way. According to Hellinger, we all have access to this greater conscience, if we seek it, in the form of our own inner voice, our own authentic and natural impulses.

Conscience of the Greater Soul, or feeling what’s appropriate for our own soul also keeps us from living out the script that we’ve inherited from our system of origin. The script has an effect: it influences what we do and experience, what we believe and perceive, but it doesn’t lead to the fulfillment of our own individuality. On the other hand, when awareness of this greater conscience has been developed, one has a criterion for judging what’s truly appropriate. Then the limitations imposed by the systemic dynamics and scripts gradually disappear.

Going beyond the limitations of one group’s morality requires identifying with a larger systemic order. That’s a truly moral movement, and you need to be willing and able to endure the feeling of guilt and alienation that comes when you violate what your friends and family hold to be good and true.

Nevertheless, what we do has consequences, and we all carry the guilt and pay the consequences for whatever harm we do to others, even when we act because of an entanglement, or because of what our group believes.

Dependency Strengthens Bonding

Conscience ties us most firmly to our group when we are most powerless and vulnerable. As we gain power and independence in a group, both bonding and conscience relax, but if we

remain weak and dependent, we remain obedient and loyal. In families, children occupy this position; in a company, the lower employees; in an army, the enlisted soldiers; in a church, the faithful congregation. These are the ones who do the dirty work for others, the faithful sheep following their shepherd to slaughter.

Mature Love vs A Child's Blind Love

Children can eventually disentangle themselves from the negative effects of their blind love by recognizing and obeying their parents' true wishes—that the children be happy and fulfilled. It takes great courage for children to see their parents suffer and yet still obey the greater love, to see to it that they themselves succeed in life and fulfill the desires of their parents' hearts.

- Bert Hellinger

Healing happens when our intimate relationships are restored to order. If you want love to flourish, you need to do what it demands and to refrain from doing what harms it. Mature love follows the hidden order, or the observable laws of the Greater Soul. Children's innocent love blindly perpetuates what's harmful.

Maturing love demands that children gradually give up the blind love of childhood and learn to love as adults. Instead of repeating what is harmful, mature love demands that they free themselves from the family entanglements. Then they fulfill their parents' deeper expectations and hopes for them. The better the children are, the better are the parents.

Legend

Standard Margin Black Ariel 11 pt – Love's Hidden Symmetry: What Makes Love Work in Relationships (Bert Hellinger, unless otherwise stated)

Editorial comments, paraphrasing for purposes of clarification and flow – Black Times New Roman 12 pt

Standard Margin Blue Arial Narrow 12 pt – Svagito Liebermeister When Life Stops: Trauma, Bonding and Family Constellation

Standard Margin Dark Red Comic Sans 11 pt - Acknowledging What Is: Conversations with Bert Hellinger

(One tab over) Red Ariel 11 pt – Bertold Ulsamer, The Art and Practice of Family Constellations

(Two tabs over) Green Ariel 11 pt – Touching Love Volume 2

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