

# INSTRUMENTS OF POSITIVE TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHOTHERAPY AS A MODEL FOR SYSTEMIC CONSTELLATIONS



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## Abstract

The article is dedicated to methodological features of constellations in the positive psychotherapy method. Models of Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy determine the structure of personal differentiation, which could be used in constellations. According to the three levels of work in positive psychotherapy (situational, notional and basic), we could discuss constellations on the three different levels. This article represents a generalization of practical experience of using the constellations on the three levels of work in positive psychotherapy in group and individual psychotherapy as well

**Keywords:** constellations, phenomenology, constructivism, systems theory, Positive Psychotherapy

## Introduction

N. Peseschkian's Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy, being a metatheory of psychotherapy, integrates well with other psychotherapeutic approaches and methods. The psychodynamic component is presented in the conflict model. A positive view of a person with his/her innate abilities for love and cognition points to Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy's humanistic roots. Cognitive-behavioral methods are widely used in work with actual capacities. The systemic approach is also obvious in so-called "Peseschkian's Circles":

I (Self) → Family → Society → City →  
Country → Humankind

These are examples of theoretical integration, built into the foundation of Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy by its founder. Technical integration is also possible alongside theoretical. It would allow the use of specific techniques of various psychotherapeutic methods within the structure of Positive Psychotherapy (PPT).

Nossrat Peseschkian wrote about the connection of PPT with other methods in his book "Positive Family Therapy".

According to the author (Peseschkian, 2016): "Positive Psychotherapy is not just one of the methods among others. It offers tools to assess which methodological approaches can be applied in specific cases and how these methods can be alternated." "Short-term Positive Psychotherapy is universal because it can explore specific elements of a particular case and purposefully apply any specific approach within the framework of the Positive Psychotherapy concept." (Peseschkian, 2016).

## Methodology

This article is about integrating constellations into Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy and is a generalization of the practical experience of using constellations both in group and in individual psychotherapy.

While studying in the method of Systemic family therapy, I acquired the skill of participating in constellations based on the systemic-constructivist paradigm, which in its philosophical and theoretical foundations is very close to the philosophy and worldview of Nossrat Peseschkian's Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy. I use the term

“constellation” not as the name of Bert Hellinger’s method, but as a designation of one of the techniques of systemic family psychotherapy. In this regard, I see the need to separate these two concepts: constellations as Hellinger’s approach and constellations as one of the techniques used within the framework of systemic family psychotherapy.

The key differences come from the different philosophical and methodological principles on which these methods are based: phenomenology in one case and constructivism in another.

Constructivism (from Latin “Constructio” - construction) is one of the directions of modern philosophy of science, which appeared in the late 70s - early 80s of the twentieth century. In a broad sense, this term refers to certain aspects of worldview and self-awareness: organizational, structural, formative and figurative. Supporters of constructivism believe that there is no reality other than that created by a person, i.e. there is no identical objective reality independent of people's perception. (Lebedev, 2004).

There are also notable differences in purposes of the techniques applied, in the psychotherapist’s position, in specific technical aspects and their interpretations, as well as in the final goal of therapy (Dobrodnyak, 2010).

## Results

If we explore the history of constellations, we can conclude that they appeared as a result of the mutual influence of the following three components:

**1. The First Component** — is the Systems Theory, which developed from the mechanistic understanding (first-order cybernetics) under the influence of biological models (Maturana, Varela) and Luhmann’s social systems theory to the modern understanding (second-order cybernetics).

**2. The Second Component** — is the technique of using representatives instead of family members, elements of larger systems or even abstract concepts. The first example of such a technique in Western psychotherapy was Jacob Moreno’s psychodrama.

In the 1960s, Virginia Satir combined these two components into her Family Sculpting approach.

**3. The Third Component** — is phenomenology. Phenomenology (from the German “Phänomenologie” - the study of phenomena) is a direction of philosophy of the 20th century. It defines its objective as a self-evident description of cognitive experience of consciousness and identification of its essential features.

Phenomenological psychology is a direction of psychology based on the ideas and methods of phenomenology. It pursues a descriptive study of consciousness, subjectivity and human experiences.

Philosophical basis of phenomenological psychology is rooted in the ideas of Edmund Husserl, as well as his

students and followers: Alexander Pfänder, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alfred Schutz, etc. (Spiegelberg, 2002).

These historical roots are common for both constellations within the system-constructivist approach, and constellations within the framework of Hellinger’s approach. Now let us explore the differences.

### 1. The Understanding of the System

A system is a construct, therefore the therapist relies on the client’s expertise in choosing participants of a constellation. The facilitator might have his/her hypotheses about a usefulness of specific participants within the constellation, but it should be discussed with the client and it is ultimately the client’s decision.

In Hellinger’s understanding, interactions within the system are determined by rules (“the orders of love”), which, according to the author, are universal. Therefore, the participants in a constellation are determined by the right to belong to the system.

### 2. The Purpose of a Constellation

In a systemic approach, the purpose of a constellation is to expand one’s understanding of a problem situation, providing an ability to perceive it more resourcefully, to see solutions. At the same time, it is accepted that there is not just one correct solution and that someone is able to direct the client towards it. The work enhances the client’s own resources to resolve a problem situation.

In Hellinger’s approach to constellations, the orders dictate the “correct constellation” and the purpose of the constellation work is to find it.

### 3. The Choice of Representatives

During the constellation work, representatives often experience feelings (sensations, emotions, impulses and even symptoms) which bear striking resemblance to the experiences of those whom they stand in for. This raises questions and gives constellations an air of mysticism. However, these phenomena have rather logical explanations. The idea of representatives belongs to Jacob Moreno, who explained such “knowledge” without the concept of “tele-”. Moreno defined it as “the process of people sensing each other, which, like cement, binds the entire group” (Moreno, 1945). In other words, “tele-” refers to the phenomena of group dynamics and embodies the process of exchange of empathy. Moreno considered the ability to look at the world through the eyes of another person to be a basic ability.

Hellinger attributed the phenomena of striking coincidences during constellations to getting into the morphogenic field of the system. Such explanations appear to be mystical.

### 4. The Position of the Facilitator

The therapist’s position in the systemic family approach has evolved from rather authoritarian (strategic direction) to the position of cooperation and partnership. The idea of the

“competent client” currently prevails, which eliminates any pressure on the client by the therapist.

Hellinger's phenomenological approach dictates the best (from the therapist's point of view) solutions for clients through correct placement within the constellation.

Thus, we can conclude that the use of constellations in the system-constructivist approach and in Hellinger's method is based on different philosophical and methodological foundations, which leads to differences in explanations and in the position of the therapist (Dobrodnyak, 2010)

As a positive psychotherapist, I use the Constellations as one of the techniques within the structure of Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy and I would like to share with you the methodology of such an approach, as well as practical experience of conducting constellations in group therapy settings.

The Systems Theory is universal. It offers a unified, interdisciplinary, theoretical language for phenomena of any level - from a cellular organism to society as a whole (Shlippe & Schweitzer, 2007).

PTPT offers such a systemic approach via so called “Peseschkian Circles”. These represent an ever expanding identity system: from “I” to “the Universe”. “Family” is just one of these circles, it follows the individual/personality level (“I”), which itself is a system: personality subsets, various roles, the unity of body, soul and spirit, a unique structure of actual capacities, etc. Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy models provide a structure for personality differentiation, which can be used in Systemic Constellations. The three levels of work in PTPT (situational, contextual and basic) offer three levels of Constellations.

### **I. Situational (Symptomatic) Level**

This level offers participants a possibility to work with an exploratory Constellation based on the Balance Model (a request for an exploration without an Actual Conflict, hereafter — AC). If there is a request for work with an AC or a symptom, then it is advisable to consider the system of the AC/problem, which includes various objects of interpersonal conflict. Inclusion of the symptom into the Constellations gives an opportunity to comprehend its function/meaning in interpersonal interactions (positive reinterpretation of the symptom), to receive feedback from the representatives (cross- cultural aspect) and to shift attention to the conflicts, which stand behind the symptom.

### **II. Contextual Level**

This level can offer a possibility to work with the Constellation using Actual Capacities (hereafter — ACP), for instance, after completing Differentiation-Analytic Inventory (DAI) or other ACP-related exercises. Another option is to explore manifestations of the Key Conflict (KC) within various relationships. If internal conflict (IC) contents and conflict dynamics are discovered, they too can be utilized in the Constellation, in search of possible resolutions of IC.

### **III. Basic Level**

Basic or identity level involves work with basic concepts, established in the client's parental family. Thus, the Constellation of the parental family (family of origin) can be useful. “Five Summits of Fate” This concept by Vladimir Karikash is also suitable for Constellation work on this level (5 existential identities: I-Son/Daughter, I-Man/Woman, I-Father/Mother, I-Human, I-Part of the Universe) (Karikash, 2009).

### **Constellation Work Based on Peseschkian's Five-Stage Model**

Below is an example of the Constellation process structure based on the Five-Stage Model of treatment.

#### **1. Distancing.**

Prior to the Constellation work, it is important to have a preliminary conversation with the client (protagonist): hear his/her problem, figure out his/her needs and request and establish through a dialogue what kind of figures he/she sees in the Constellation (people, spheres of the balance model, actual capacities, identities, etc.) The therapist should suggest that he/she should choose representatives, assign their roles and positions in a given space. Then the client is encouraged to watch the complete Constellation and concentrate on his/her feelings and thoughts (observation).

At this point in time, the client assumes metaposition and observes the Constellation of his/her situation from outside, thus distancing him/herself from it. The Constellation itself represents a visual, kinesthetic metaphor, which also contributes to distancing.

#### **2. Taking Inventory**

At this stage the client listens to the feedback of all the representatives. The therapist instructs representatives to voice their corporeal sensations, feelings and impulses without explanations or rationalizations. The protagonist is in charge of the order in which representatives give their feedback, thus receiving additional information about the situation. It is important at this stage to figure out whether the feedback resonates with the protagonist. Usually, everything said by the representatives produces client's “yes”-reaction”.

#### **3. Situational Encouragement**

At this stage it is important to highlight positive aspects of the Constellation, asking resource-oriented questions and questions focusing on positive reinterpretation:

- Which resources can you see in this Constellation?

- What do you gain from this kind of balance (interaction)?

#### **4. Verbalization**

This stage of the Constellation work gives the client a chance to see pathways and means towards conflict resolution, as well as new opportunities for growth and balance. After the client confirms his/her readiness to see prospects for change, the representatives are granted the

opportunity to move freely and find more comfortable positions in the Constellation. They then provide feedback about their sensations in their new spots. The protagonist observes this dynamic and notes his/her reactions. When the Constellation acquires its final structure, the therapist suggests that the protagonist trade places with his/her representatives and stand in this "good place". Often, this results in an emotional reaction and deep awareness, which can facilitate decision making. The client is then encouraged to verbalize his/her conclusions and complete the Constellation by releasing the representatives from their assumed roles.

### 5. Broadening of the Goals

However, this is not the end of Constellation work. The group process should end with sharing: the representatives are asked to separate their sensations and feelings that appeared during the Constellation process, from sensations and feelings connected to their own lives. It is also important to hear out those observers who did not take part in the Constellation, but can share their emotional reactions and alternative perceptions. Once the entire group have completed its feedback, the protagonist should report what he/she found useful from the Constellation work and the feedback of the participants.

### Conclusion

The Constellations provide a valuable opportunity to see existing dynamics within the family system or personality, which are often not fully realized by the client. The protagonist is thus given an access to unconscious information via the participants in the Constellation group, their sensations and feedback. Their physical reactions provide further input about dynamics, which the client is not aware of and cannot see (Franke, 2007).

Thus Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy, which is usually highly structured and operates on a conscious level, is complemented by an unconscious (irrational) component.

It should be noted that constellations are only part of a large complex psychotherapeutic work. The material raised during the constellation process can be explored over many sessions. Therefore, it is important that the psychotherapist has a complete education in one of the recognized psychotherapeutic methods and can use more than just constellations in his/her work. It is also important to realize that it is impossible to study constellations by reading books, watching films or even completing several seminars with a recognized master. Learning constellations, first and foremost, happens through personal experience in a group form: by observing, participating as representatives and creating one's own constellations.

The first experimental training project on constellations in Positive Transcultural Psychotherapy took place in 2018-

2019 in Poltava, Ukraine under the supervision of the Ukrainian Institute of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy.

I see the effectiveness of integrating constellations into Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy.

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