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## The Social Atom

The social atom is a diagram or picture that represents the nucleus of all individuals to whom we are emotionally related. The study of these atoms and their interrelation is important in understanding the relationships we have with the significant people in our lives and, therefore, in any attempt to modify relationship issues and/or personality disorders. The social atom can be entirely done as a paper-and-pencil exploration, used much in the way a genogram is used only with the added ability to become more fluid in revealing the nature and quality of connectedness from individual to individual. It can also be used in as wide a variety of explorations as one can imagine; for example, social atoms can be done of the family of origin, present-day family, friends and work, imagined or desired future life circumstances, a moment in one's past, a work or school relationships, or a dream. Or social atoms can be done to compare and contrast the before and after worlds of trauma, or the sober versus the using world of the addict or addicted family. The social atom is one of Moreno's very significant contributions to the mental health field, and it influenced the creation of the genogram from family systems theory. For this reason, I have given the social atom its own chapter in order that those wishing to use it exclusively as a paper-and-pencil exploration can understand how it stands on its own.

And for those who wish to concretize the social atom on stage and move it into psychodramatic exploration, instructions are given later in the chapter. Experiencing one's social network on paper is surprisingly adequate and more than meets the need of the client to understand and explore their personal network. Meeting one's network or, say, family of origin, through role-play has a most unusual effect, like meeting up with characters from the past, present or future in the here and now where they can be dealt with in the present moment. The social atom is an excellent focusing instrument for treatment as it can represent virtually any point along the continuum of one's life, including the social atom one was born into or adopted into. Because it can be done for any time—past, present or future—it helps the client to coalesce a variety of influences and understand them in an organized fashion.

A social atom offers the opportunity for us to see ourselves. "The social atom is the visible constellation of the tele range of an individual. It is the nucleus of individuals to whom a person is emotionally related or who are related to them at the same time. It reaches as far as tele reaches, representing relationships near, far, alive or dead. It is the sum of interpersonal structures resulting from choices and rejections centered about a given individual" (J. Moreno 1934). This self-produced clear, concise and objective feedback provides a concrete map of the client's relationship range, which can include people, pets, institutions or careers. The information on a social atom reveals not only the client's relationship range, but also the quality, number and nature of her relationships and her sociometric experience within a particular group.

The social atom is useful both in individual therapy and in a group context. Clients may take time to do it on their own and may share it either with the large group, in smaller subgroups or with a therapist. The social atom can be used as a paper-and-pencil activity or moved into action as an action sociogram. It can also be a warm-up to vignettes or monodramas. If you wish to use the social atom as a paper-and-pencil activity it can be followed by sharing and/or the exploration of questions through psychodramatic journaling or discussion (see Role Diagram, page 167).

We are all born into a particular social atom, or what Moreno referred to as a "model group." The nature of the connections within that model group are

represented by a *family-of-origin* social atom and tend to get carried along throughout life and projected onto the various relationships that we subsequently enter. Following are three examples of categories of social atoms, but the reader should keep in mind that the social atom can be adjusted to meet virtually any need.

The *present-day* social atom reveals to both client and therapist, the relational structure in which the client currently lives. Institutions or interest groups can also be represented. The social atom can offer a starting point for life changes. Questions for exploration after the social atom has been written and shared might be: "Where are the issues that you feel you'd like to work on?" or "What about your atom is working well for you?" and "What might you like to change?"

The *family-of-origin* social atom is diagnostic in that it reveals a client's internalized relational structure, the family of origin, and extended family and friend relationships upon which others may have been built. It has the added advantage of being produced by the client herself, so any resistance she may have in looking at her relational world is tempered by the fact that she is the person committing it to paper, rather than the therapist. Once the present-day atom is completed, clients can use the family-of-origin social atom to begin exploring the impact the family has had on their development, and they can look for how their past may be impacting their present in terms of reenactment dynamics and transferences. The family of origin atom provides an object relations map that can be referred to throughout treatment when understanding transference. For example, if an employer is a particular target for transference the therapist might ask, "Who might your employer represent for you from your family-of-origin social atom?" The family-of-origin social atom provides an enormous amount of information for both the client and the therapist as to the constellation of the family model-group and the client's sociometric alignments, misalignments, relations and status within the system.

A *future-projection* social atom can be used to concretize desired social atom repair or goals for the future. An atom can be drawn that represents how a client may want their life to be at any point in the future. The future atom can reflect desired life changes, dreams or ambitions. It can include wished-for relationships, careers or hobbies. It can also very practically and realistically diagram desired treatment outcomes.

The social atom can be a useful referent for change if done every so often throughout the treatment process. We can use it as a guide toward that change by asking questions like: "What would I like to be different on my social atom?" or "What aspects of this might I choose to change?" and "What are the parts of my social atom that I am bringing from my childhood into the present that might not be helpful today?" and finally, "What transferences from the past are being played out on my present-day atom?"

### HOW TO READ THE SOCIAL ATOM









In reading the social atom, the primary source of information will come from the client. This is an efficient way of gathering many insights into the client's personal history, and because it is client-driven and self-interpreted, the insights the client gains for himself can feel very meaningful to him. An average atom used in therapy probably has from fifteen to twenty-five people on it and represents the psychological, individual and emotional levels of a person's social structure most commonly worked with during treatment of the individual. It acts as that person's object relationship map. The social, collective and acquaintance levels may or may not appear on the atom, depending on the instructions given by the therapist.

Here are some things to look for when you read a social atom:

1. **Large and distant images.** These may represent concerns with authority figures. Or they may be the way a child perceived a parent at a given period of time if this is a social atom representing childhood.
2. **Small and distant images.** These may represent negative transferences or competitive sibling figures, particularly if they are very small. Or they may simply be part of one's network but not of primary importance (Siroka 1988).
3. **Overlaps.** These may indicate relationships in need of differentiation, if they are not otherwise explained.
4. **Horizontal or vertical bisections.** If a vertical or horizontal line bisects a symbol, note whether there is a difference between what's on the left and on the right in the eyes of the client. For example, past and present, male and female.

5. **Omission.** Is there anyone who is conspicuous by her omission or absence on the atom? For example, did a client leave her father out and, if so, why?
6. **Erasures, changes or multiple lines.** These may indicate there is some unfinished business or anxiety where more will need to be explored. The client's pencil seems to go round and round while drawing the symbol. (Siroka 1988).
7. **Location of symbols vis a vis the writer of the social atom.** The relative size in comparison to and the distance or closeness of the symbols in relationship to the writer of the atom may reveal the way in which the writer views himself vis à vis those represented on the atom.
8. **Location of symbol representing the self.** The location and relative size of the symbol that the writer of the atom uses to represent herself may indicate how she feels in comparison to others on her atom.

### Notational System For Social Atoms\*

	= female
	= male
	= genderless (to represent institutions, careers, large groupings, etc.)
	= deceased female
	= deceased male
	= mutual attraction
	= mutual rejection
	= mutual indifference

\*This is the most basic notational system; many more variations are possible. For more information, see Chapter Notes. *Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations: A Manual for Psychodramatists and Sociometrists*, Royal Publishing Co., Roanoke, VA. James Vander May. "A Perceptual Social Atom Sociogram," in Anne E. Hale, ed., vol. 28 (1975), 128–134.

The following are different levels of representation on any given social atom:

1. **The psychological.** The psychological level indicates the people who are most intimately connected with us, with whom we have the strongest tele connection. It visually represents an individual's tele range.
2. **The individual.** This level represents the smallest number of people we require to be in balance. It changes as our level of spontaneity changes.
3. **Emotional expansiveness.** On any given atom, these are the people with whom we have some emotional recognition and connection. Emotional expansiveness measures the emotional energy that enables the individual to "hold" the affection of other individuals for a given period of time.
4. **Social expansiveness.** On any given atom, there are people with whom we are not intimately connected but nevertheless with whom we feel a tele connection; they are more than distant acquaintances.
5. **The collective.** This level represents the smallest number of groups and collectives we require to be in balance. It includes the formal structures that provide us with opportunities to express various sides of ourselves, such as family, social groups, job, school or hobby groups. It can be called the cultural atom or the cultural aspect of the atom.
6. **Acquaintance volume.** This might represent anyone with whom we have come into contact and become acquainted. The acquaintance volume represents the volume of "social" expansion of an individual, the range of his social contacts. The acquaintance volume does not necessarily reflect relationships with deep, emotional connection but the number of people one "is able to interest . . . how many people he can transfer an emotion to and from how many people he can absorb emotion." There is a sociometric "point of saturation" of a specific homogeneous group for a specific contrasting element under given conditions. The point of saturation may change with the organization of the interrelated groups (*Who Shall Survive?* Moreno).



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## PRESENT-DAY SOCIAL ATOM

### GOALS:

1. To make conscious the quality and nature of the patterns that form a person's social network.
2. To provide a map of interrelations that the therapist and/or group members can refer to throughout the treatment process.

### STEPS:

1. Have participants get pencil and paper.
2. Invite group members to make an atom of their current lives. Say, "Using circles to represent females, triangles to represent males and squares to represent institutions or groups, first locate yourself on the paper, anywhere that feels right to you."
3. Continue, "Now locate your significant relations as close or distant from yourself as you feel them to be and in the size or proportion that feels right. You may include pets, in-laws, grandparents, friends and so on. Use a broken line to represent anyone who is deceased. Write the name of each person inside or next to his or her symbol."
4. Once all the symbols are on paper and the atoms feel finished, people can begin to share them, either in the large group, with a partner, in small groupings or with the therapist one-to-one. Remind them that these atoms are only a current reflection; they are always subject to change.
5. Sharing the atom may bring up many feelings toward or about those present on the atom. Allow plenty of time for sharing all these potentially strong feelings.
6. After the sharing is complete, you may (a) move the social atoms into action (see Action Sociogram), or (b) keep them and refer to them as a measurement of growth.

### VARIATIONS:

Clients may share their atoms with the therapist or group by holding them up and saying something like, "This is me. I made myself," etc., and then go on to describe others on the atom and who they are in relationship to. Present-day atoms provide a picture of a client's current relational network.

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## REGRESSIVE OR FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN SOCIAL ATOM

### GOALS:

1. To concretize the social atom on paper.
2. To offer an opportunity for interaction with real rather than imagined people.

### STEPS:

1. Ask group members to find a pencil and paper.
2. Reflect on your family of origin, either a specific time from your past or a general representation of your early life.
3. Say, "Using circles to represent females and triangles to represent males and squares to represent institutions or groups first locate yourself on the paper, anywhere that feels right to you."
4. Continue, "Now locate your important relationships or significant tele relations as close or distant from yourself as you feel them to be, and in the size or proportion that feels right. You may include pets, in-laws, grandparents, groups, institutions, careers, friends.
5. Next, invite group members to share their social atoms with the group, or, with the therapist if done in one-to-one therapy. Family-of-origin social atoms may be shared in the here and now from the self of today or the client may reverse roles and share from the point of view of the age represented by the social atom; e.g. "This is me, I am ten, my dad is large and distant and my mom is small and very close to me. I have a dog Buster who is with me all the time. My grandparents are really close to me on my atom, my brother is bigger than me and pretty close," etc.
6. Continue to allow any who wishes, to share their atom.
7. At this point the group may A) continue to share, B) move into an action sociogram (move the social atom into action) or C) do psychodramatic journaling.

### VARIATIONS:

Family-of-origin atoms can represent any point in time from past till present that includes family-of-origin members. Or the director can give specific instructions such as, "Do an atom of a time that felt problematic in your upbringing, when you felt especially lost, especially happy, when addiction took hold, where there was a crisis, when the family felt calm and

secured," and so on. Virtually any time can be explored through the vehicle of the social atom.

If moving into action, protagonists may wish to warm up by walking around the scene they have set up and soliloquizing about what they are experiencing. They may wish to end the enactment in the same manner or simply back up and talk to the family sculpture at large for closure. For example: "Say the last things you wish to say to or about this group being represented." Or a protagonist may wish to sculpture the scene as they wish it had been in order to have a visual picture of that wish.



## FUTURE-PROJECTION SOCIAL ATOM

### GOALS:

1. To concretize goals for the future.
2. To function as part of a treatment plan.
3. To function as part of an aftercare plan.

### STEPS:

1. Have participants get pencil and paper.
2. Ask group members to imagine their future as they might wish it to be at some point, for example, in six months, one year, three years, five years, etc.
3. Invite group members to make an atom of their lives as they would like them to be. Say, "Using circles to represent females, triangles to represent males and squares to represent institutions or groups, first locate yourself on the paper, anywhere that feels right to you."
4. Continue, "Now locate your important relationships or significant tele relations as close or distant from yourself as you feel them to be, and in the size or proportion that feels right. You may include pets, in-laws, grandparents, groups, institutions, careers or friends. Label them appropriately."
5. Once all the symbols are on paper and the atoms feel finished, people can begin to share them, either in the large group, with a partner, in small groupings or with the therapist one-to-one.
6. These can be moved into action or used exclusively as a psychodramatic journaling exercise.

**VARIATIONS:**

A future projection social atom can concretize wishes, goals, plans or dreams for the future. Desired life situations, partnerships, friendships, hobbies and career plans, to name a few, can be included on this atom.

An aftercare social atom can be done to reflect the sorts of life and relationships that a client may need or wish to create. This can function as part of a treatment or aftercare plan. Addicts often need to face changing groups of friends as part of staying sober. Concretizing these changes and identifying people who might become part of a group of recovering friends can help them take the first step. Other activities that reflect positive life changes can be included as well, such as twelve-step programs, exercise, meditation and so on.

**PSYCHODRAMATIC JOURNALING EXERCISES TO DO WITH A SOCIAL ATOM**

First, do any type of social atom that you wish to do. Then do whatever journaling exercise the client feels warmed up to do.

**JOURNALING VARIATIONS:**

- Write a letter to anyone on your social atom to whom you have something to say.
  - Reverse roles with anyone on your social atom and write a letter "as" that person back to yourself that you would like to receive, or write a letter as him or her to someone else.
  - Write a journal entry "as" yourself as you are represented on your atom (if you are young, journal as yourself at that age; reverse roles with yourself as an eight-year-old, for example).
  - Reverse roles with anyone on your social atom and write a journal entry "as" that person.
  - Dialogue with anyone on your social atom, writing "to" them, then "as" them.
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## ACTION SOCIOGRAM

### GOALS:

1. To concretize the social atom or any scene or model scene that is being moved into action.
2. To offer an opportunity for interaction with real rather than imagined people.

### STEPS:

1. Ask group members to draw any version of their social atoms.
2. Choose a protagonist through any of the selection processes, then ask the protagonist to choose auxiliaries to represent those on the social atom or any grouping of those represented, including a stand-in to play the self, if desired.
3. If you feel the auxiliaries need to find out more about their roles, you may ask the protagonist to reverse roles and show the group a little of what the person being role-played is like before choosing someone for the role.
4. Set the scene or place the auxiliaries.
5. Ask the protagonist either to go where he is drawn to interact or to mill around the whole picture until he feels drawn to a particular person, at which point he may begin to speak to that person.
6. Allow the protagonist, if he wishes, to step out of the picture and take a full view of the setup and see how that feels. He may reverse roles with himself or double for himself where motivated.
7. Move through the enactment, allowing the protagonist to express his thoughts and feelings freely (within group norms, of course) to any and all characters, using all techniques appropriate, such as role reversal, doubling, interviewing and so on.
8. Ask the protagonist to finish the scene in any way he feels inclined to, including, if he wishes, correcting the scene by structuring it as he wishes it had been. You may offer him the choice of having reformed auxiliaries in order to get what he wishes he had had; he can ask for what he wants and receive it psychodramatically.
9. Leave plenty of time for sharing what came up for group members and what the auxiliaries felt while playing the various roles. Derole all auxiliaries by simply stating, "I'm (name of group member) not (name of role played)," or by symbolically "brushing off" the role and/or by sharing what it felt like to play the role, then making a clear and intentional shift into the role of self and sharing what came up personally from

participating in the drama. Even while playing a role it is common for many personal feelings that will need to be shared to come up.

### **VARIATIONS:**

Any scene put into action can be called an action sociogram. Here it represents social atoms or parts of social atoms that are concretized and enacted. Family-of-origin atoms can represent any point in time from past till present that includes family-of-origin members. Or the director can give specific instructions such as, "Do an atom of a time that felt problematic in your upbringing, when you felt especially lost, especially happy, when addiction took hold, where there was a crisis, when the family felt calm and secure," and so on. Virtually any time can be explored through the vehicle of the social atom.

Protagonists may wish to warm up by walking around the scene they have set up and soliloquizing about what they are experiencing. They may wish to end the enactment in the same manner or simply back up and talk to the family sculpture at large for closure. For example: "Say the last things you wish to say to or about this group being represented." Or a protagonist may wish to sculpture the scene as the wish it had been in order to have a visual picture of that wish.

It may be useful to include intergenerational scenes to gain perspective on the generational chain of dysfunction and to promote understanding that parents, for example, passed on what they got from their own parents, concretizing a chain of dysfunction composed of learned behavior patterns. For example, the protagonist, while in role-reversal as the mother, can break off from the scene, freeze it and momentarily do a scene as the mother, perhaps talking to her mother, in order to explore the generational aspect of behavior patterns. They can then bring this to closure and return to the original scene and continue playing it. This can help clients to feel less singled out for abuse and realize they were victims of intergenerational patterns and that individuals have their own history that is brought to bear on their relationships. It also empowers them to choose to do things differently. They may also come to see the strengths that have been passed through the generations.

### Possible Variations on the Social Atom

- **Developmental Atom.** People can make developmental social atoms representing particular times of life—as a child, adolescent, teenager, young adult, householder, elder and so on. When sharing them they can share from the present day, or reverse roles and share as the age represented on the atom.
- **Parent's Atom.** Making a parents atom can be a powerful tool when made

for a time during which the parents' life situations may have complicated the life of the protagonist. For example, Ben, who feels his life went off track at age twenty, makes an atom of his father's or mother's life at that time, as well as his own, in order to investigate how their lives impacted his. It is also useful to make a parents social atom at the time of their marriage, or at the time of the birth of the protagonist. Another very useful social atom might be at the time of the birth of a sibling or a family loss or death. Making generational atoms like these can help people reconstruct their history and illuminate what was passed down through the family system.

- **Parent-Child Atom.** This is an age-correspondence atom. If a client feels his child is having a particularly difficult time, it may be useful for that client to do a social atom of his own life at the current age of his child. Doing so will help him to see if the child's problems are triggering unresolved wounds from the parent's past or if the parent's past is, in some way, being projected onto the child.
- **Sober Versus Nonsobber Atom.** (See *Two Different Worlds*, page 98.) Participants who were raised in addicted families can make atoms showing how their family life was organized while the addict was sober and how it was organized while the addict was using. Family alliances, positioning and object relations can shift according to whether or not the addict is using. This atom reflects that shift and sheds light on one of the reasons that living with addiction is crazy-making.
- **Before and After Trauma Atom.** Trauma tends to divide life into two; life before the trauma took place and life after the trauma. Object relations can shift significantly after a traumatic event, along with thinking, feeling, behavior, and perception of life and the world. Doing one's social atom before the trauma and then after can help to reintegrate the life before the trauma, which may feel lost, with life afterward, which may have changed significantly or perhaps in subtle ways.
- **Social Atom of a Dream.** A social atom can be done that represents a dream using all of the symbols to represent dream images or people. It can be concretized as an action sociogram and moved into a psychodrama using role reversal, doubling, interviewing, soliliquizing and so on in order to

deconstruct the meaning of the dream for the protagonist.

- **Substance Atom.** Participants can make atoms that locate themselves in relation to any substance, person, place or thing that might be used compulsively or addictively—work, cocaine, sex, food, exercise, cigarettes and so on—to get a picture of multiple addictions. When doing this atom, ask the client to “locate the substance or behavior as close or distant and in relative size to the self as feels right.”
- **Addicted Atom.** An atom can be made to reflect sexual relationships and encounters that are a part of a person’s addicted world. Relationships can be based around “using friends” or sexual encounters, for example. These relationships can be concretized on an atom.

### Questions for Exploration When Using the Social Atom

The following are possible questions for exploration in one-to-one therapy, group therapy or to use as psychodramatic journaling exercises. This can be part of using the social atom as a self-diagnostic tool. The beauty of it is that it provides an objective form of self-feedback for clients. In other words, they can come to their own insights and conclusions by examining what is in front of them on the paper. This is very esteem building because clients feel empowered in seeing the self. This often has the effect of building trust, an ability to depend on others in healthy ways, as clients feel less infantilized and more like partners in their own healing.

### Questions for Exploration When Using the Present-Day Social Atom

1. With whom do you feel you have a good rapport or connection?
2. Whom do you feel disconnected from, rejected by or rejecting of?
3. With whom do you have unhealthy relationship bonds, if any?
4. With whom are you reenacting dysfunctional relationship patterns from past relationships (unfinished business)?
5. With whom do you have unresolved issues (hot buttons) that you need to explore in therapy?
6. Are there any covert alliances in this system?

7. Whom do you go to for support?
8. To whom do you give support?
9. With whom is the give and take of support mutual?
10. Are there groups in your current network that do not serve you well?
11. Are there groups in your current network that do serve you well?
12. What changes would you like to see happen in your network or relationships?

### **Questions for Exploration When Using the Family-of-Origin Social Atom**

1. Where were your close-bonded relationships, and do you continue to draw strength from them today?
2. From whom did you experience acceptance/rejection, and does it still affect you today?
3. Whom do you accept/reject?
4. How did you experience yourself in your family system?
5. How do you think others experienced you in your family system?
6. What would you like to say to yourself at the age represented here, from where you are today?
7. What would you like to say to the family system?
8. What do you see as your role or roles in the family system at any given point; is anyone cut off or disconnected from the system?
9. What are the covert or overt alliances in this system?
10. What patterns from the family-of-origin system are getting played out in your life or your family today (intergenerational patterns)?

### **Questions for Exploration When Using the Future-Projection Social Atom**

1. How do you imagine the relationships represented on this atom might feel to you?
2. What do you imagine the activities on this atom might do for you?
3. What practical steps do you think you need to take in order to actualize the categories in questions one and two?
4. What feelings are brought up when you look at your life as you would like it to be?
5. What would you like to say to yourself as represented on this atom?



### Two Different Worlds:

#### **Using the social atom to compare and contrast sober versus nonsober family dynamics or the before and after object relation shifts of the trauma survivor**

Survivors of trauma, people from addicted homes and addicts themselves oftentimes live in two different worlds. For the person who has experienced a sudden loss, there is life *before* the trauma and *after* the trauma. After a trauma a person's sense of a predictable and orderly world can feel shattered. His or her inner world can be consumed with thoughts and feelings related to the trauma that might manifest as fears, phobias, anxieties, flashbacks, nightmares or somatic disturbances such as an exaggerated startle response, migraines, stomach or back problems and other stress-related disorders. Life after the trauma can feel different with the disquieting awareness that bad things can and do happen. Suddenly, the world can feel like a potentially threatening place or relationships with people can be anxiety provoking—people are neither perfect nor permanent and life is unpredictable. Object relations can shift after trauma, that is, the nature and quality of relationships can change. Concretizing these shifts on **before** and **after** social atoms can help to clarify the impact trauma had on the client and the ways in which it impacted the client's life.

For the ACOA addict and coaddict, there are two distinct realities: the one while the addict is using, and the one when the addict sobers up. Addicts cycle between using and sober behavior. This forces family members to make sense of two different realities, the sober and the nonsober, each of which has its own code of ethics, morality and rules of engagement. The thinking, feeling, behavior, and emotional atmosphere are different for each world and often nearly impossible to integrate into a coherent whole. The person in this environment never knows where to find firm ground to stand on. He "walks on eggshells," holds his breath and "waits for the other shoe to drop." In short, he becomes *hypervigilant* constantly scanning his environment for signs of danger. The object relations for each reality shift, as do alliances and family behavior. For the person living with other forms of dysfunction such as mental illness, abuse or neglect, there can also be two different worlds—the family that is presented to the outside world and the family's inner world. The two may not match up (Dayton 2000).