

## Identifying a Protagonist: Techniques and Factors

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The article describes five methods of identifying a protagonist: (a) volunteering, (b) action sociometry, (c) paper-pencil sociometry, (d) social atom, and (e) information revealed during sharing or integration phase of psychodrama. Furthermore, the article discusses six factors that are significant to the selection of a protagonist: (a) type of group, (b) size of group, (c) time available, (d) types of conflicts, (e) characteristics of potential protagonists, and (f) director's preference.

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A major concern for any psychodrama director is to facilitate the emergence of a suitable protagonist. Any group member is a potential protagonist. Consequently, a director's task is to stimulate group processes that aid the emergence of a protagonist who is acceptable to both group members and director.

Although there are several excellent textbooks on psychodrama there appears to be little specific information written on the subject of identifying a protagonist. The textbooks generally focus on describing the stages of psychodrama, defining various terms such as "a double," and giving detailed descriptions of selected episodes. Many students in our training groups have expressed concern about the lack of literature on how a director selects a protagonist. Typically, a type of mystique surrounds this selection process. It is not uncommon that students, in the post-discussion phase, inquire from the director about the rationale of selecting a particular member as a protagonist. It is to fill this need that this article proposes a framework by which a protagonist may be identified.

The article will focus on two aspects of the selection process: (a) What are some of the techniques that facilitate the emergence of a protagonist

and (b) What are some of the factors that the director needs to consider in the screening of a member to serve as the protagonist?

The framework developed in this article is based upon the authors' experiences both as group members and as directors. As the framework derives from personal experiences and not empirical research, it is to be evaluated for its heuristic value rather than any set procedures that guarantee particular solutions. This presentation may stimulate the refinement of some ideas, the generation of new ideas, and possibly some needed research in this area.

### Techniques of Selection

Although there is potentially an infinite number of ways a director can select a protagonist, we will detail here five approaches that are commonly employed: (a) volunteering, (b) action sociometry, (c) paper-pencil sociometry, (d) social atom, and (e) utilizing information revealed during sharing or integration phase of psychodrama.

In the use of any technique (or a combination of techniques), it is important to recognize that both the group members and the director play different, but complementary, roles in the selection of a protagonist. The director provides a stimulus (technique), and the group members respond; then both the director and the group members evaluate the results, and the director then provides a new stimulus. It is this continued interaction that provides the necessary information to the director in deciding who might best serve the interests of the group in the role of a protagonist.

*Volunteering.* This method is most direct in approaching the group members in regard to their intent. Putting a simple question to the group (e.g., "Who has a conflict to share with the group?") may call forth a volunteer. If more than one member comes forward, a simple voting procedure can be employed by asking members to line up behind the individual "whose problem they identify most with." If the group is very large (20 or more), a show of hands might be appropriate. If time permits, it may be possible to work with several protagonists in a single session.

The volunteer method is most useful when working with (a) large groups, (b) group members who have had previous experience with psychodrama, regardless of the size of the group, and (c) short sessions (less than two hours), regardless of the size of the group.

*Action Sociometry.* This method involves asking group members to respond to sociometric or near-sociometric questions. The responses of the group members to these questions highlight the criteria leading to

their choice of one person over another. The group members are asked to touch a person's shoulder with their right hand, if first choice; with their left hand, if second choice.

An action sociometric question is characterized by three features: (a) It taps feelings (positive, negative or neutral) of group members towards other members, (b) it uses a specific criterion, and (c) it is usable immediately to facilitate group functioning (Moreno, 1953). For example, "Select a person in the group with whom you would spend the next ten minutes discussing a problem you are currently struggling with." After group members display their first choices, and then their second choices (if need be), the director uses this information to form small subgroups (dyads, triads, quadrads) for actual discussion purposes. After ten minutes, a member of each subgroup summarizes the presence of the entire group to the subgroup member's conflict. The director can then ask the group members to select the one person whose conflict is most appropriate for further exploration by psychodrama. The "star" of this selection would be the most obvious choice to serve as a protagonist. In case of a tie (or multiple ties), one or more protagonists may be employed, given sufficient time. Alternatively, the group members may display their second choices. Sometimes, the second choices may reflect more valid patterns than the first; consequently, a director may choose to go with the second choices rather than the first. The director may also try to make use of data from both choices (e.g., by averaging the number of choices for each person) in selecting a protagonist.

Knowledge (on the part of both group members and the director) of group structure, in terms of "who chose whom" patterns (dyads, triads), may also be extremely useful in identifying auxiliary egos to facilitate the action component of psychodrama.

A near-sociometric action question differs from a sociometric question in two ways: (a) It employs an ambiguous, abstract, or projective criterion, and (b) it may or may not be immediately usable to facilitate group functioning. For example, "Who in the group appears to have the greatest amount of empathy for you?" (see Moreno, 1953).

Nonthreatening sociometric and near-sociometric requests (e.g., "Select a person to share a coffee-break") are particularly valuable in getting a group started. More direct questions pertaining to the selection of a protagonist (e.g., "Select a person in the group to serve as a protagonist") should be postponed until the group has demonstrated some degree of warm up and integration. In our experience, about three or four questions are necessary for the group members to warm up to each other and the director to warm up to the group.

members. In fact, after the first one or two questions, the group members may be asked to propose more questions. Using several questions helps the integration of the group as different people are chosen for different questions; isolates on one question achieve star status on another question and vice versa. Furthermore, any subgroups that may exist may also be diffused by using several questions.

Members who retain star status on several questions are sometimes referred to as leaders. Such individuals can be spotted quickly by using a number of action sociometric and near-sociometric questions in the warm-up phase of a session. Leaders and stars on individual questions are excellent choices to serve as protagonists especially in the initial stages of an ongoing group. They serve as role models for other members and convey to the group that it is "O.K. to take risks." Leaders can be especially useful as auxiliaries (e.g., brother, father, spouse) as they are most acceptable to the group on a variety of criteria.

It is important to note that stars and leaders do not always make the most appropriate protagonists. Sometimes it may be more important to choose an isolate, who may be powerful in negative ways in the group, as a protagonist. It is only in the early stages of an ongoing group that stars and leaders may be more helpful as protagonists to get the group going. It is particularly important to pay attention to persistent (over time and many questions) subgroups as they pull the group in different directions. A badly fragmented group may require direct intervention by the director to investigate why such fragmentation exists, and then either a sociodrama or working with multiple protagonists is necessary to crystallize the conflict(s) to bring about group cohesion.

The usefulness of sociometric and near-sociometric questions may be enhanced by asking group members the reasons behind their choices, soon after the choices have been made. Verbalizing reasons helps the warm-up process by reducing the mystery behind choices, thereby facilitating the building of trust among the group members. Furthermore, verbalization of reasons provides the director valuable information about individual members in the group. Verbalizations not only help generate further sociometric and near-sociometric questions spontaneously (on the part of both the director and group members) but also give important clues about individual members' areas of concern. The director can use the information revealed and approach a group member to serve as a protagonist by saying, "You stated that. . . . Perhaps you might like to explore further this area of concern to you."

If the member is willing to pursue this concern further, then it is important to clear this choice with the entire group by asking, "Does anyone have objections to John being a protagonist?" If there are objec-

tions, then the objections voiced may have to be dealt with first before proceeding with the psychodrama. Sometimes, it may be necessary to ask more sociometric questions to make a fresh selection. (See Kumar & Treadwell, 1985, for more examples of sociometric and near-sociometric questions and details on their applications to psychodrama.)

*Paper-Pencil Sociometry.* This method is most useful in the context of an ongoing group, where data collected from one session can be used in later session. Typically, group members write on a sheet of paper the choices for each question. The primary purpose of paper-pencil sociometry is to record group members' choices for various questions to plot sociograms. (See C. Hollander, 1978, and Kumar & Treadwell, 1985, for details on plotting sociograms.) The sociograms are helpful in identifying stars, leaders, isolates, mutual choices, and other relationships in the group.

The sociograms of a session can be displayed in the subsequent session and a group member may be asked to discuss the results. These discussions are helpful in stimulating further action sociometric and near-sociometric questions that can be implemented as explained in the previous section for selecting a protagonist and other supporting auxiliaries.

The sociograms are useful in understanding the structure of a group and the changes that occur as the results of sociometric and psychodramatic episodes over many sessions.

*Social Atom.* Sharon Hollander (1974) identified three types of social atoms: (a) psychological, (b) collective, and (c) individual.

The *psychological* social atom is the smallest number of people (e.g., family members, friends, teacher, counselor) needed to make the person feel a sense of sociostasis (social equilibrium) or completeness. These individuals in the social atom play significant roles in a person's feeling of well being, and without them life may not be meaningful. The *collective* social atom refers to the smallest number of groups or organizations (e.g., YMCA, church, kennel club) that a person needs to belong to in order to feel complete. The *individual* atom consists of those significant individuals in the various collectives that a person belongs to. There are other possible types of atoms in a person's life, for example, object atom and food atom (see Moreno, 1947).

Based upon Sharon Hollander's work, Kumar and Treadwell (1985) have developed an instrument, the Triadic Circle of Interpersonal Relationships, to gather data on the three types of social atom. The instrument consists of three concentric circles, divided in three parts for each atom. The group members locate (in the designated areas of the circle for each atom) their significant others, in reference to themselves. Th-

center of the innermost circle is represented by a dot, which stands for the responding member. The responding member then is asked to locate individuals (by placing numbered dots) in reference to this center dot; the further away a person (or a collective) is placed the less significant the person (or the collective) is for the responding member. For the *psychological* and the *individual* atoms, members are instructed that the significant others may include pets and deceased people. The group members are asked to place an "X" through the dot for a deceased person, and write a "P" next to a dot that stands for a pet. Then, on accompanying sheets (one for each atom), members are asked to indicate sex and the relationship of the significant other (e.g., uncle, brother, girlfriend) for the *psychological* and the *individual* atoms; for the *collective* atom, members are asked to identify the collectives on an accompanying sheet.

As these different social atoms depict a person's networks of relationships, they contain valuable data concerning a person's conflicts that can be further explored psychodramatically. A person who indicates only three significant others or only pets in the social atom is possibly alienated from society. Distances from the self-dot might be suggestive of problems in relationships; for example, mother is placed in the outermost circle, but a cousin is placed in the innermost circle; or, one of the parents may be simply left out of the atom. A careful look at these social atoms, combined with a discussion of possible interpretations with the responding member, can help a director select a protagonist.

Social atoms are best used in ongoing groups, where such data can be collected in the second or third session. The director can study these data carefully at leisure and select individuals as possible protagonists for later sessions. Social atoms can also be employed in all-day sessions where there is enough time to fill them out and to give the director the opportunity to look them over. In limited time sessions, social atoms can be acted out by individual members on a voluntary basis, using other group members to represent their relationships. Filling out the social atoms can also serve as a warm-up technique, by having people think about their relationships. In our experience we have found that as they fill out the social atom form, group members report feelings of guilt that arise from excluding someone from the social atom or placing a parent in the outermost circle. Discussion of the content of the social atom can be followed by action sociometry for the selection of a protagonist.

Kumar and Treadwell (1985) have developed a simple variation of the above instrument, the Triadic Circle of *Intimate* Relationships, which gives more direct information about a group member's conflicts in relationships. The instrument consists of three concentric circles,

each divided into three parts as with the previous instrument. Before, the center dot represents the self, and, with reference to the self-dot, group members are asked to place in one section those people with whom they have significant intimate relationships *currently*. In the second part, they are asked to indicate what current relationships they would like to *terminate*; in the third part, they are asked to indicate the people with whom they would like to *initiate* or *intensify* relationships. Before, the closer another person is located to the self-dot the more important that relationship is to the responding member.

*Information Revealed during the Sharing Phase.* The sharing phase of psychodrama episode is a significant source for spin-off psychodrama to emerge. Individual members moved by the psychodrama episode reveal a number of important concerns about their personal lives. Although it is not necessary to put these concerns into action immediately to achieve closure for individual members or the group, the wealth of self-disclosure can serve as a significant source for identifying potential protagonists for later sessions. Sometimes the feelings expressed by a group member are so strong that a director may have to give immediate attention to the person during the sharing session, letting him or her go through what may be called a "mini" drama or vignette.

### Factors in Selection

Typically, directors go through a screening process even when voluntary protagonists are sought. From our experience, we have identified five factors that affect the process of selection of a protagonist: (a) type of group, (b) size of group, (c) time available, (d) types of conflicts, (e) characteristics of potential protagonists, and (f) director preference.

*Type of Group.* Is the group meeting for the first time? How familiar are the group members with psychodrama and related concepts? Do group members know one another? Who is in the group? Will the group meet only once or over several weeks? Consideration of these questions will help identify some of the techniques that are likely to work. Clearly, if the group members have had no experience with psychodrama, then some elementary work needs to be done, such as explaining the basic concepts, and stressing the significance of confidentiality of disclosed information. Warm-up techniques (particularly action sociometry) that lower the resistance of group members might be valuable for an inexperienced group. If, on the other hand, group members are experienced, one can do away with some of the elementary procedures, even the use of extensive warm-up techniques. If

ongoing groups, directors have the benefit of accumulating information about group members that may help in the selection (or rejection) of particular members as protagonists.

It is important to consider who is in the group. Are there married or unmarried couples? Are there bosses and subordinates? A director needs to be sensitive to the presence of particular people in the group in choosing a protagonist. There is no rule, etched in stone, that prevents a director from working with one spouse in the presence of the other, but a sensitive director will be careful in selecting the nature of conflict to work on.

*Size of Group.* Psychodrama groups can vary anywhere from 5 to 200 members. The typical size may be between 15 and 20 members. Some directors are extremely skillful in working with very large groups, others are more comfortable in small groups. However, regardless of the size of the group, selection of a protagonist may be a difficult task. We have observed directors taking as much as 30-45 minutes (in small and large groups) before they settle on a protagonist. This is despite the fact that there are fewer potential protagonists in a small group. While action sociometry methods may be more appropriate in small groups, in very large groups the volunteering method combined with voting by the group members might be more appropriate.

*Time Available.* Duration of a session is important in considering what selection techniques might be employed. The average duration appears to be between 2 and 4 hours. In longer sessions (3 hours or more) action sociometry may be employed effectively. In shorter sessions (2 hours or less) the volunteering method might prove most efficient in selecting one protagonist.

*Types of Conflict.* Each member brings to the group some type of conflict. A member's conflict may be idiosyncratic or may be common to many group members. It is usually a good idea to choose a member whose conflict appears to be shared by many group members because it will be meaningful to almost all members. There are times when a director may choose to work with a member whose conflict is idiosyncratic. This type of conflict is best handled in an ongoing group, where the individuals with conflicts need to be incorporated. All concerns are equally deserving of consideration (attention?) by director and group members, who determine their relative importance to the group as a whole. If members with idiosyncratic conflicts are constantly ignored in an ongoing group, they might become disruptive.

It may be a good idea to avoid working on problems that involve serious issues such as murder and rape in short sessions. These are best handled in ongoing group psychotherapy sessions and preferably when

the director has a back-up staff. (Of course some directors specialize in these issues, and the foregoing comment may not apply to them.) Probably issues most effectively handled in limited time sessions involve everyday conflicts of relationships (e.g., with a spouse, any family member, lover, friend, or boss), loss of relationships by death or divorce, and conflicts with oneself (e.g., feelings of inferiority). If a person has recently (within a month) broken a significant relationship, it may be better to postpone working with such a person until a later time. When the immediate grief felt has subsided, the person can work on the conflict(s) with the lost person.

*Characteristics of a Potential Protagonist.* Some individuals are easily warmed up to being a protagonist, other members need much prodding. Some have deep conflicts but would rather be left alone completely. Some demonstrate a great amount of eagerness to be a protagonist. Some idea of these characteristics of members can be observed during action sociometry, when they interact with other group members.

It is important that no member be forced into a protagonist's role or any other role. In short sessions, it is better to avoid a member who gives too strong or ambivalent signals about being a protagonist. In an ongoing group, initially resistant members may show greater likelihood of accepting a protagonist's role after they have participated in several different roles in the group. Although members who show a great amount of eagerness to be a protagonist might be acceptable, it is important to recognize that their conflict may not be significant to the group. Such individuals may be too scripted to be spontaneous. It may also be that they as individuals may not be acceptable to the group. Action sociometry might be useful in screening out highly eager members, as then the onus of selection shifts from the director to the group.

*Director's Preference.* It is important that directors exercise their preference in the type of people or even the type of conflict they feel most comfortable in working with. Generally there is no need to state this preference publicly, but faced with a highly eager member who demands to be the protagonist, a director may need to state his/her preference to the group, perhaps by saying that the conflict is too difficult to work on because of limitations of time or his/her own lack of experience with such conflicts.

Application of these techniques will facilitate the process for selecting the protagonist of the psychodrama in a therapy group.

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## Teachers' Perceptions as They Relate to Children's Current and Future Sociometric Status

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Subjects in this study were 762 elementary school children who were pretested on teacher, peer, and self-report trait rating scales. Sociometric ratings of these children and their classmates were also obtained at that time. Sociometric questionnaires were administered five years later to almost half the original sample. Canonical analyses revealed that pretest sociometric rating can be predicted by peers' trait ratings. Other canonical analyses revealed that pretest sociometric ratings predicted a small but significant amount of variance in posttest sociometric ratings. The inclusion of pretest trait ratings substantially improved the prediction of posttest sociometric status. Sociometric pretesting predicted only a small percentage of variance, and most sociometric status shifts that did occur were not marked, with initially unpopular or popular children occupying average status upon posttesting.

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Although the study of children's friendships has been of concern to psychologists and educators for many years, it has taken on even greater significance in recent years as a result of two factors. First, data have accumulated on the long-term adverse effects of social rejection during childhood. Social rejection during childhood has been related to psychiatric problems during adulthood (Cowen, Pederson, Babikian Izzo, & Trost, 1973; Strain, Cooke, & Appoloni, 1976), juvenile delinquency (Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972), bad conduct discharge from the military (Roff, 1961), and dropping out of school (Ullmann, 1957).

A second reason for the invigorated interest in children's friendship is that, as a result of federal legislation, namely the Education for A

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