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Sociometry I: General Considerations

Sociometry is both a general approach to certain aspects of group dynamics and a specific method for the assessment of the patterns of attraction and repulsion among the group members. Groups often have a formal structure involving designated leaders and assigned roles, perhaps even with chains of authority. In addition, groups have informal structures determined by personal preferences, what Moreno called *tele* (to be discussed below), and it is these patterns that are measured by sociometry (Moreno, 1933, p. 31).

Moreno believed that these informal micro-sociological dynamics were incredibly important in affecting the morale and effectiveness of larger social groups. Preferences were a psychosocial phenomenon that partook of spontaneity, and working out ways of honoring these telic preferences also served the greater vision of creating a healthier, more authentic, and more interpersonally spontaneous society.

Thus, sociometry was an important part of Moreno's philosophy and general social psychology. Moreno (1934, p. 10) at first distinguished overall theory from the specific method, calling the former

“socionomy” while the latter referred to actual mathematically oriented procedures. After a few years, however, the latter term came to be used to include both the greater and narrower sense. In this chapter, we’ll discuss the general perspective, and the next chapter will include descriptions of sociometric methods.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Moreno (1953, p. lx) claimed to be the first to use the term “interpersonal relations” in psychiatry, antedating Harry Stack Sullivan’s more widely known use of the term by several years. The term was in the subtitle of his first published professional journal, *Sociometry: A Journal of Interpersonal Relations*, and in one of his first articles (Moreno, 1937). Certainly, he thought in terms of what would now be called “systems” how individuals and groups interact within fields of mutual influence. Group dynamics weren’t a matter of mere transferences projected by individuals but also reflected patterns at a more subtle and complex level. Some of the dimensions or factors affecting this realm include:

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|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| role distribution | preferences |
| role conflicts | reciprocal perceptions |
| parts of self | expectations |
| conflict resolution | temperamental differences |
| matching interests | nonverbal communications |
| obtaining access | sharing values |
| making boundaries | communications styles |
| degrees of commitment | competing commitments |
| verbal skillfulness | psychological mindedness |
| sexual hunger | perceived power gradients |
| money and security | established vocationally |
| political interest | cultural mix |

Moreno’s role theory, discussed in previous chapters, and his ideas about *tele*—to be addressed in greater detail below—are valuable contributions to our understanding of group dynamics, but they shouldn’t be thought of as sufficient. A number of other dimensions have been written about by people in fields of social psychology, group psychotherapy, communications, organizational development, and the like, and psychodramatists should learn about these as well (Corey & Corey, 2000; Ettin, 1992.)

SOCIAL BEING-NESS

Moreno was particularly sensitive to the social dimension, viewing human nature as embedded in a dynamic field of relationships. It could fairly be said that, historically and conceptually, psychodrama emerged from Moreno's "sociometric" ideas. They go a step beyond interpersonal relations, noting that groups operate not merely as the sum of the individuals but have their own complex dynamics—a holistic rather than reductionistic view. In other words, in spite of our hyper-individualized culture in the West, people also have a potential for experiencing and operating at a collective level, for better or worse.

Humans are social beings, herd animals, and in addition to our tendencies towards egocentricity there are also potentials for community and, beyond that communion, the experience of "we-ness" replacing the sense of "self." Recognizing this, we need an approach that bridges individual and social psychology (or sociology)—such as applied role theory—and methods like sociometry, applied role theory, and psychodrama for developing greater degrees of group cohesion and co-creativity.

Groups are, in turn, embedded in a great number of cultural institutions—politics, economics, the arts, various fashions, recreation, language, etc.—which have even more complex dynamics emerging at their own levels. Thus, our systems of psychology need to be able to learn from and contribute to research and constructive activities in these related disciplines.

While it may be impossible to fully describe all the elements operating in a field, specific problems may nevertheless be addressed in ways that take into account phenomena and dynamics at whatever levels that seem relevant. For example, current family dynamics, in part, depend on broader social norms or changing expectations which are themselves controversial regarding discipline, day care, sex education, etc. In this sense, many psychodramas have elements which are also sociodramatic.

One implication of our social being-ness is to recognize, as the feminists and eco-psychologists have observed, that the personal is political. That is to say, what is engaged in collectively, or, unfortunately more frequently, what is avoided, have general consequences which then affect the individual. Therefore, psychodramas also have elements which could be sublimated as social action—that is, *sociatry*.

CO-UNCONSCIOUS DYNAMICS

This was an interesting concept proposed by Moreno and many others who have dealt with groups (Moreno, 1972, p. vii; Zuretti, 1994; Bannister, 1998). In psychodrama, a common phenomenon is that protagonists, when they're warmed up to states of high spontaneity, often choose others to play parts as auxiliaries who, in fact, share certain qualities, such as similar events in their own histories, yet this information had not been previously shared. Many other incidents of intuitive connections, uncanny "coincidences" (Jung called these "synchronicities"), and the like all support a respect for the possibility of a kind of ESP—extra-sensory perception or the dynamic of unconscious connections in group functioning.

Most notable is the the work of the British group analyst Wilfred Bion and his theories about the "group mind" or "group-as-a-whole" approach (Neri, 1998). This seems similar in spirit to Moreno's co-unconscious, although most people remain somewhat wary about what methods or conclusions can be based on this hypothesis.

TELE

Also intangible yet far more capable of being measured is the phenomenon of interpersonal preference, the attractions or repulsions that occur between people or among group members. Moreno considered this dynamic one of the most important and often overlooked factors in group dynamics.

Moreno's term for the category including both positive and negative preferences is *tele*, and it is this dynamic that is the focus of sociometric measurement (Barbour, 1994; Blatner, 1994). Tele is by no means excessively abstract: Think of those you prefer or like in certain ways: Those are people with whom you have positive tele. There are others who evoke a sense of discomfort or repulsion, and with them you have negative tele. Some people you know are relevant in your life, but there's not much of a preference either way. This would be called neutral tele. Others around you just don't seem relevant to your interests, and with them you are indifferent. Interestingly, more often than by chance these feelings are reciprocated. Everyone has these shifting sets of variable reactions to everyone else in their social field.

When examined carefully, however, tele is *role dependent*. People have different sets of preferences for others according to different

kinds of needs. An individual may like three people in a group, but one represents a more romantic interest, a second is preferred because the person feels the other could be helpful in practical ways, while the third seems like someone to whom one could tell his troubles.

Although tele is a complex human interaction, it is a natural extension of a dynamic found throughout nature—even primitive animals show preferences for certain others, either as a recognition of affinity for sexual purposes or perhaps because the other promises to “taste good.” More complex creatures become organized in a wide variety of social forms. Still, while animals may have instincts, in humans these take on an overlay of emotions and imagery made possible by their more complex nervous systems. It is this combination of instinct and imagery that Jung meant by the term “archetype.”

Moreno made a special point of differentiating tele from transference. While transference involves the carrying over into a present relationship expectations based on past experiences with others—therefore distorting the real relationship—tele, in contrast, involves interactions based mainly on the perceptions of actual qualities in the other person. Many, if not most relationships, though, contain a mixture of both transference and tele. The psychoanalysts Greenson & Wexler noted in 1969 that many reactions by analysands that their analysts had (mistakenly) thought were transference were, in fact, based on realistic readings of the therapist’s verbal or nonverbal behavior (i.e., tele). And, in turn, what have been considered telic preferences are often contaminated by transference and unrealistic fantasies. Sociometry shares with dynamic psychotherapy the goal of clarifying the actuality of interpersonal interactions, discriminating the realistic perceptions from projections, stereotypes, and other forms of irrational thinking.

As mentioned, preferences are based on conscious or unconscious criteria, and clarifying these can be one of the richest activities in psychotherapy or personal development. Consider some of the more common reasons for positive or negative choices:

temperamental similarities	
temperamental differences	cultural background
ability or experience	regional background
exotic differences	life-style, values
familiarity	smell, sound of voice
physical proximity	an easy “mark” or “win”
a worthy competitor	common interests
level of vitality	attractiveness:

role complementarity:	physical, sexual,
leader/follower	intellectual, social,
active/passive	spiritual, playful,
helper/helpee	emotional, artistic
talker/listener	and reciprocity

This last element, reciprocity, is important enough to merit further discussion later on. Clients generally find the exploration of why their preferences are the way they are as most relevant. Also, the applicability of these criteria shifts with role and context. Therefore, in sociometry, careful attention is given to the specifying of the criterion for choice. In any analysis of a given situation, the naming of the specific issues involved is necessary if we are to truly understand the interaction.

Two general categories of criteria for making choices may be discerned: *sociotelic*, referring to a shared goal or common interest, or *psychetelic*, referring to personal qualities or rapport that exist aside from any utilitarian reason. Sociotelic criteria might be more operative in a group in the community that meets because of a special shared area of concern. For example, the saying “politics makes strange bedfellows” refers to the fact that those we might select as allies in a cause may not be people we would pick for friends. Psychetelic criteria, in contrast, reflect that more intuitive and personal rapport and may be seen operating in the natural subgroupings or cliques that get together for coffee, invite each other to parties, or play outside at recess.

Knowing about *tele* has other practical applications. One is that people begin to attend more to subtleties that may have been previously ignored, noticing their own preferences and the nonverbal cues of others who seem to reciprocate those feelings. Not knowing about *tele*, on the other hand, leads to a common tendency to override or ignore these interpersonal currents, leading to a variety of interpersonal frictions which are then misattributed to other reasons, compounding the problem.

Another value of recognizing *tele* is that, since it is one type of a process that is largely intuitive in nature, the more people practice responding to it, the more interpersonally sensitive they become—it’s a skill that can be developed.

A third benefit of the concept of *tele* is that, like temperament, nonverbal communications, and role analysis, among others, it is a general tool which makes it possible to discuss, negotiate, and find creative alternatives regarding areas of conflict. Sociometry brings some of these issues into awareness, and psychodrama helps to work them out.

One of those interpersonal frictions arises because of the tendency to generalize. If there is positive tele, people tend to idealize each other; if the tele is negative, people tend to excessively devalue each other. Idealization means qualities are attributed to another that have not been realistically demonstrated, while devaluing refers to the denial of any positive role capabilities just because certain others may not be perceived. Idealization leads to disappointment, and devaluing leads to excessively impermeable barriers being set up.

Knowing that tele is role-dependent, however, and becoming aware of the reasons for telic reactions helps to counter those overgeneralizations and, instead, supports the recognition that a person may be appreciated in some roles while not being particularly special in others. This also suggests that people should be free to renegotiate their roles in groups so that they are not subtly compelled to function in a way that is least likely for them to be enjoyed. Explorations of such themes could be useful in ongoing group therapy or within a therapeutic community.

It should be emphasized that just because the *tele* in a relationship is negative it doesn't mean that either party is wrong or bad or deserving of blame. People often feel a sense of shame and/or guilt when encountering negative tele. However, at times two otherwise fine people will not only not "click," they will "rub each other wrong." They should just accept this, not override this felt reaction and attempt to be actively friendly. When the "chemistry" is wrong, such efforts tend to compound the friction. Instead, they should limit their efforts to being reasonably kind and courteous. Perhaps at some future time another role dimension will arise where they may find more rapport, but it can't be forced.

RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity refers to the phenomenon in which a feeling is returned in kind. Sociometric research has demonstrated that both positive and negative tele tends to be reciprocal more often than by mere chance. Sometimes this intuitive "take" occurs even before much interaction has happened between the parties. Of course, when one person discloses a positive inclination, showing a sense of liking or interest, it tends to evoke similar feelings in return. Similarly, subtle behavioral cues indicating dislike are often reciprocated. There are also some interactions in which no reciprocity occurs, with X preferring Y but Y being indifferent to or even repelled by X. This is called "mixed tele,"

and such interactions may serve as useful sources for reexamination of the criteria for choice in the situation.

The theme of reciprocity is very useful in psychotherapy because it deals with the complexity of interpersonal relationships. Rather than being a one-way or even two-way process, interactions are viewed as involving an ongoing series of many communications and interpretations. Thus, interactions can become dysfunctional if either party:

- sends confusing messages, whether they include incongruent nonverbal signals or vague, circumstantial, or evasive verbal communications
- indicates insufficient response
- misinterprets the other's communications
- is unwilling to or does not know how to check out the validity of an interpretation
- signals that the process of communication is not an acceptable subject for comment
- communicates negative expectations
- is insensitive to nonverbal cues or even clear statements

A sense of *mutuality* is developed when the participants in a relationship can communicate an openness to offering or receiving attention, interest, respect, help, or support. Mutuality also increases as people can reciprocally indicate a willingness to exert an equal amount of effort toward a shared goal. Discussion of these themes in therapy and education offers foundations for building skills in more effective communications. When people have a greater sense of mastery through knowing a variety of mature techniques for getting attention or making boundaries, they are less likely to regress to the use of manipulations.

Another reason the concept of reciprocity is useful is that it offers a powerful tool for exploring the phenomena of transference, projection, and other distortions of the interpersonal field. By discussing the general ideas of tele, preferences, reciprocity, and the like, clients are given a general framework, a simple language, along with an expectation or norm of examining the accuracy and motivations in interpersonal relationships.

USING SOCIOMETRY

Since tele is such a pervasive and important dynamic in human relations, it makes sense to develop methods to convert these interactions

into workable information, the better to consciously structure groups and work constructively with the feelings of all involved. Moreno's attitude was consistent with the general trends in and beyond the fields of psychotherapy towards advocating more consciousness. He recognized that it's better to know and make decisions based on accurate information than to maintain illusions and avoidances. Of course, avoidances, whether in the realm of individual or group psychology, often offer some short-term relief from having to deal with uncomfortable truths but, in the long run, problems tend to be compounded.

In sociometry, though, as in therapy, sensitive issues are raised and must be dealt with carefully. It's necessary to first establish a holding environment of stable and mutually supporting relationships—in groups, what is called “group cohesion.” This supportive context then allows for the courage to explore aspects of relationships which may be emotionally threatening. Often the preparation for and follow-up to a sociometric investigation may require far more skill, tact, and effort than the execution of the actual procedure—and this point will be discussed in greater detail further on.

In fact, the generation and maintenance of a group norm that is motivated to know its own dynamics is really more fundamental than the method itself. The actual classical technique of sociometry is just a feedback technique, like the function of a scale in weight control. The actual change agent is the broader sociometric procedure, involving the development of a general commitment to self-disclosure and clear feedback, followed by an exercise of skills in improving interpersonal relations and group cohesion. In other words, sociometry includes not only the gathering and organizing of information about the telic patterns in a group but also the work with the group to constructively anticipate and then deal with that information.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The roots of sociometry began in Moreno's experiences around the second decade of this century, as discussed in chapter 2. In the early 1930s, he developed the method further while acting as a consultant at the Hudson School for Girls in New York (Hare, 1992), and these experiments became the basis for Moreno's most elaborate book, *Who Shall Survive* (1934, 1953b).

As a relatively early, practical approach to social psychology, so-

ciometry became more recognized in the 1940s and 1950s. Moreno's journals included encouraging statements by many eminent social scientists. It's especially important to acknowledge the seminal work on sociometry by Helen Hall Jennings (1950, 1959). In the 1950s and 1960s, the method was utilized primarily in the educational system (Evans, 1962; Gronlund, 1959; Northway, 1967), and other applications were noted in the books and journals Moreno published on the subject (see Bibliography).

Sociometry and its related approaches of psychodrama and group therapy require a commitment to greater levels of honesty, and attention is given to the actual relationships in the here-and-now. These themes are also found in the methodologies of the T-Group, one of the precursors of the encounter group.

In 1946, leadership training programs aimed at dealing with community issues, such as interracial tensions, were held at a retreat center in Bethel, Maine, staffed by students of the group dynamics research group of Kurt Lewin who had also been influenced by Moreno. The staff at these retreats soon discovered that their programs, which included role playing, began to stimulate feedback sessions which "processed" the events in previous meetings which, in turn, led to an ongoing self-reflective group dynamic, the T-Group, which functioned a little like group therapy for healthy people.

Several founders of the T-group, such as Ronald Lippitt and Leland Bradford, as noted, were familiar with Moreno's methods (Moreno, 1953a). In fact, some of their seminal papers, around the time of the organization of the first T-groups in 1946 and 1947, were published in Moreno's journals (Lippitt, Bradford, & Benne, 1947)! A few years later, the T-Group was modified and applied in education and community organizational development, becoming known as sensitivity training; a decade later, this approach fused with the emerging field of humanistic psychology to become the encounter group.

In the fields of academic sociology and social psychology, sociometry was mainly used as a research instrument in the 1950s and 1960s, and even then its popularity was only modest. In 1956, Moreno gave his journal, *Sociometry*, to the American Sociological Association which, for many years, continued to publish it but with almost no inclusion of the writings of Moreno or his more immediate followers. At the time of this writing, sociometry is hardly mentioned in the indexes of most textbooks on sociology or social psychology.

In spite of sociometry's being one of the first scientific methods to be used in sociology, it was most widely used for research, with little

effort given to implementing the findings with the groups so studied. This was directly counter to Moreno's intention which was for the emergence of what might be called today an applied behavioral science, one that directly helped the people who were being tested (Mendelson, 1977). He saw the sociometrist as being a participant in the process—it was an ethical imperative and an extension of his existential philosophy. Sociometry was a tool people could use to monitor the state of their own collective functioning, and with this information they could make informed decisions about changing group norms, procedures, and roles. Beyond describing the phenomena of group dynamics, it is important to identify, create, and work out the technical problems involved in attempting to correct "group illnesses."

Of course, sociometry required more than what was part of the repertoire of skills of the average academician. Few professors of sociology or social psychology are equally trained in group therapy, and such a synthesis of disciplines was necessary for the emergence of what Moreno called sociotherapists or sociatrists. Moreno hoped this new field of professionals would have a socially recognized role in diagnosing and treating conflicts within and between groups, neighborhoods, organizations, and even nations, like that of a psychotherapist treating an individual or a family. Certainly, there is room for such a role, because larger collectives exhibit even more dangerous forms of psychopathology and self-deception. The rudimentary state of our knowledge and the presence of collective resistances should not deter us from envisioning and building toward recognition of the validity and methods in such a role.

PRESENT STATUS

The most significant fact about the status of sociometry in the behavioral sciences is that most people not involved with psychodrama have hardly heard of it! Since the 1960s, sociometry has become a rather obscure and only occasionally used technique in social psychology. Furthermore, when it is used by academics, the subject matter is most often the relatively easily controlled contexts of elementary or pre-school playgrounds and classes, addressing the phenomena of popularity, social skills, and clique formation in these age groups (Bukowski & Cillessen, 1998). In those academic settings, almost nothing has been done to actually use the method as Moreno intended, to help

people be placed so they can work or play with those with whom they feel the most rapport or to work out the frictions within groups that interfere with group cohesion.

On the other hand, sociometry is being very constructively used by some psychodramatists in Australia and in other countries, especially those who are consulting to businesses and other organizations.

The problem is that sociometry is ideally a profoundly helpful tool for people who are not too defensive and genuinely interested in learning about their own group interactions. This requires a degree of psychological sophistication and emotional resilience that is as yet still rare. In other words, for most situations, sociometry is a method that is not yet ready for popular usage. The same might be said, however, for many other group methods. Still, sometimes other technologies mature and make possible new integrations that hadn't been previously possible.

Even in the teaching of psychodrama, many trainers hardly mention it during the early phases of training. Before the Board of Examiners established their certification procedures and questions on sociometry came to occupy a significant place in the written testing, it wasn't even taught much in the middle phases of training! Now it's become a significant element in the knowledge base of a growing majority of psychodramatists, which leads to some interesting secondary problems.

I think that sociometry needs to be recognized as a separate method from psychodrama in applied social psychology, sociology, or group work. It is quite possible to apply each approach without recourse to the other. Furthermore, in spite of several historical and philosophical areas of overlap, psychodrama theory on the whole has only a modest degree of overlap with sociometric theory. One could well argue that sociometry has an equal amount of relevance to non-psychodramatic group work. This position is admittedly controversial, and in 1999 on the Internet-based listservice, "Grouptalk," some people agreed and others vigorously disagreed (Forte & Propper, 1999).

Of those who claimed that the two methods are inextricable, one argument was that it's valuable to know and keep in mind an awareness of sociometric dynamics when working with groups and doing psychodrama. The same could be said, however, for it being desirable to also keep in mind an awareness of many other types of dynamics. It's not that I don't appreciate sociometry—I do! I believe it represents a complex of ideas that are not sufficiently addressed in most other facets of psychology or sociology. It's just that I recognize that it can

stand on its own as a form of applied social psychology, although it is still a very young field. There's so much yet to be learned.

Moreno wrote about sociometry at length, propounding various "laws" of sociodynamics, although, really, they should better be called "hypotheses" because either they haven't been well tested or their practical implications are unclear. Some are relatively obvious, on the order of the old cliché, "them what has, gets"—applied to friends as well as money. However, in spite of the sheer volume of his writing and the many papers by others, there is still a need for the development of more specific guidelines for helping groups examine themselves and constructively work out their problems. Some of these more specific approaches will be addressed next.

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