

Sociometry with Senior Adults: the diminished social atom by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

What are ways you can adapt personal sociometric exercises when working with senior adults many of whom have a diminished personal social atom.

Cultures vary in the ways they care for their elders. Associated with aging in many cultures are changes and losses related to physical health and capacities, changes in family roles, social and work life, and the roles associated with care of the home and surroundings, including neighbors. Role loss may be seen as a reduction of spontaneity and creativity in the older person. 1 Two sociometric exercises I would adapt for work with senior adults are the personal social atom and the role diagram.

A certain sensitivity is required when speaking with persons whose role repertoire has diminished. It is helpful to have current knowledge of the individual's circumstances and the losses they may have sustained. These methods may be used for both intake interviews, where you complete the actual diagrams, and for later individual and group explorations.

The Social Atom

(1) Build a social atom from looking at available photos. You can begin with an album, photos in a person's room, photos carried in a wallet, etc. You can even suggest that they reminisce and speak of photos not taken but images which they hold in their memory. At the moment I was working with an individual (in a group) I would have them consider the fluidity of their social atom over the years...then setting out the social atom from somewhere in time...following the protagonist's warmup as it went forwards and backwards in time. 2

(2) Use alternatives to pencil and paper, or moving into physical action in instances where the person is unable to either write or move about easily. A selection of magnets can be made available for them to choose as symbols of particular persons, or Play of Life kits such as those made available by psychiatrist/psychodramatist Carlos Raimundo. If a group is available there is an element of role engagement which occurs when people with whom they are now living take on a role, even for a limited time, in order that the person is stimulated to remember, complete issues and connect in the here and now from a role active in the past.

(3) Build a social atom from watching a film focused on a particular role repertoire. Choose a film which stimulates their memory of family life, or work life, or social gatherings. If there is a scene of a party, then they can build a social atom of people in their life that came to a party they gave, attended, or who they would want to come a party if one was given today.

(4) Holiday social atom - Have the person choose a holiday and build a social atom of the persons they have usually spent time with on this holiday.

There are many ways to move into a social atom. These examples are offered to stimulate your creativity.

The Role Diagram 3

A role list is made which can be a role cluster (Parent, teacher, etc) or be named in very specific

terms. A person charts the feelings one has about themselves in the role and about another person in the case of an interactive role diagram.. A notational system is used to identify roles active now, once active roles, and wished for roles. In terms of role re-engagement, this notational system can be quite useful for helping to form a list of role needs. Here are some suggestions for adapting the role diagram for use with senior adults.

(1) Build a role diagram around one role, identifying specific actions and interactions which make up that one role. Such as: (a) a favorite role; (b) role associated with an important skill; (c) role where the person makes an important contribution.

(2) Make a collage of pictures torn from magazines of action components of longed for roles. Paste these on a sheet of paper or into a small book. Make written notations for ways the person can begin to move toward these roles in their current environment. Example: The person cut out a picture of a person ice skating. "I used to love to ice skate and was quite good at it. Won prizes." This can be followed up by choosing a movie that includes ice skating for her friends or other group members to watch. Give the person the remote to stop the movie, and talk about the particular technique involved in skating. Help the person see the value in their particular expertise.

(3) The body role diagram: Kabat-Zinn (1990) offers a device he terms the "body scan" which can be used to conduct a guided tour through the body, relaxing and also communicating with the body. An adaptation which can be used with the role diagram is to add "when you come to this part of the body, call to mind all the things this part of your body used to do, and thank it for those years of service." This mindfulness activity helps to train the person to be in the present even when identifying past events. The next step can be a body scan where the person allows into their consciousness what the part of the body wants to do, and to imagine it happening in the here and now.

In the conclusion of Kerry Altman's paper on institutionalized elderly he states: "The use of action group methods can provide an approach which fosters group cohesion, spontaneity, role re-engagement and role substitution. Certainly this approach, as in all approaches to chronicity, requires a great degree of stamina, but more importantly, it requires a willingness on the part of the therapist to seek a varied role repertoire to invoke the appropriate reciprocal role. What has traditionally been called "resistance" in these patients may well be our inability as therapists to find the effective role correlate." 5

1. Altman, Kerry Paul, "Psychodrama with the institutionalized elderly: a method for role re-engagement" Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry, Vol. 36, no. 3 (Fall, 1983) p. 87-96.

2. Howie, Peter. E-mail response to the Practitioner question" August 30, 2006, 12:06am.

3. Hale, Ann Elisabeth, "The Role Diagram Expanded" a chapter in Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations, Roanoke, VA, Royal Publishing, 1985.

4. Kabat-Zinn, Jon, Full Catastrophe Living, NY, Dell, 1990.

5. Altman, Kerry P, p. 95.

Note: If you click on Bibliography on the home page, and search under "elderly" 27 articles are listed, as further resources. AH

This page comes from International Sociometry Training Network:
<http://sociometry.net>

The URL for this page is:

<http://sociometry.net/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=18>