

Increasing Sociometric Status of a Defensive Group Member by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

Practitioner question

There is a member of your psychodrama personal growth group who frequently takes a defensive position when group members respond to his complaints with suggestions. His sociometric position is becoming more negative. Describe some interventions which may result in positive changes in his group position. An answer suggested by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

Introduction

In this example the group member feels safe enough to complain publicly about several issues. The other group members feel accepting enough of this individual to extend offers of solutions. So far, so good. The statement, "His sociometric position is becoming more negative." is most likely a hunch based upon observations of the defensive posture, the difficulty this man has receiving suggestions, and the reactions in the group to an apparent lack of receptiveness on his part.

One of the ways you can invite rejection in a group is to withhold from a person, a sub-group or the entire group, something which it values. In this example, the persons who offer a suggestion wish to be heard and to receive an acknowledgment of their attempts to connect to the concern being expressed. Repeated offers declined will most likely create a mood of frustration. It is also just as likely that the person complaining wants to simply experience being heard, to have the experience of speaking a complaint and to have the complaint accepted. The greater the energy directed outward in the act of discarding the suggestions the greater distance group members will want from what is disturbing to them. Group members need the skill and the courage to say, "Whoa," and hold up a hand, and request that the interaction slows down until everyone is on the same page about what is going on, both internally and interpersonally. This is a good time for an intervention.

Concretize the issue and responses in action

One of the things which is measured when we are doing sociometric explorations is the nearness/distance factor. One of the action sociometric exercises which can be employed in this situation is to represent through positioning, using objects, pillows, chairs, scarves, magnets, or people: (1) the complaint being expressed; (2) the suggestion being offered; (3) the impact of the offer; (4) the rejection of the offer; (5) the experience of the rejection of the offer by the person offering; (6) the experience of the other group members witnessing this; and, (7) the decisions made by both parties in terms of choices "in the future." The key players are invited to move the representative of elements around, and use placement (nearness and distance) to indicate the impact of the choices made in response. Facilitators of the action may ask that the parties make a soliloquy at various points in order for everyone to reveal more fully what is coping 1,

what is new, what is not useful.

Re-visit group building and norms

The behavior described in the question may also be a response of someone who has difficulty with group size, increasing intimacy and self-disclosure, and the demands placed upon oneself in order to belong. The norms for communicating may need to be explored, as well as additional group building which offers various smaller groupings and dyads. These are offered in order to explore comfort levels with group size.

The norms around the roles related to helping and reaching out can be addressed as a group role repertoire exploration. Group members can participate in identifying roles of high value and roles of low value.² Not everyone will be in agreement of what are roles highly valued. For this person the role of making offers of help may not be as highly valued as being allowed to speak his truth in a way which is congruent with ability.

Practice joining 3 and being in a "Yes" set

Persons who train in improvisational acting practice being in a "yes" set, or frame of mind. One person makes a statement, which is followed by an enthusiastic "Yes, and..." with elaboration on the subject, followed by another person picking up the cue, saying "Yes, and (adding even further elaborations)". It works best to practice in a small group of three or four. After everyone knows the instruction, one person starts with any statement, even a complaint. For example: "I drove here giving myself plenty of time to arrive for group on time, and had to sit here while we waited for the same people to show up, late as usual." Followed by, "Yes, and I twiddled my thumbs until they're bleeding. See? There's blood all over my shirt, shoes and these new dress pants I wore." "Yes, and do you think they apologized or even noticed the blood on the floor? Of course not! Even when one of them slipped on the blood and fell." "Yes, and then they asked if we'd take them to the hospital to get their broken leg attended to. The almighty gall!" Perhaps this seems ridiculous, and minimizing. What is occurring is in fact, agreeing and being accepting of the complaint and enlarging on it in ways which exert a role demand on people to continue agreeing and enlarging on the scenario. Once the yes set has been practiced in this ridiculous fashion, follow it with an example which isn't played for laughs. Such as: "I tried to talk to some people but they didn't seem to want to listen." "Yes, and when that happens I get angry." "Yes, I get angry but I am NOT going to let anyone know." "Yes, they don't deserve to know what they did to me." "Yes, I know and it's going to stay that way." "Yes, I am getting really good at storing my feelings away." "Yes, I can stuff my feelings forever if I need to." "Yes, so what if someday I explode. Then they will know." "Yes, they'll know and then they'll be sorry." At the point of stopping, the person making the original statement can make any additions or corrections. The original scene can be enacted with a role training component.

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1. Clayton, Max (1994) "Role Theory and Its Application" in Psychodrama Since Moreno, edited by Paul Holmes, Marcia Karp and Michael Watson. London, Routledge, pages 121-144, Clayton writes and depicts a role analysis chart on page 139, headed by "Progressive Functional Role System" the "Coping Role System and the "Fragmenting Dysfunctional Role System". The coping roles are described as (my italics) moving towards, moving away and moving against. This exercise helps the group members to identify actions which are coping choices as well as what happens to move the role enactment choice toward a progressive role rather than a fragmenting dysfunctional role system.
 2. Hale, Ann E. (1985) "Group Exploration of Act Hunger for Roles of High Value" in Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations, Roanoke, VA, Royal Publishing Co., p. 193.
 3. Joining is a function of supportive doubling, a term from the psychodramatic method which asks that another person take a position alongside and tune in, speak aloud and portray the inner thoughts and feelings of a protagonist or group member. The person being doubled is asked to put things in their own words and to make corrections when doubling statements don't fit.

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