

The Action Sociogram in Group Decision-making

Trainer question

You are preparing to teach the action sociogram, and ways of working with it not only as a follow-up to a sociometric exercise, but also as a way to facilitate group decision making. Describe some of the key elements you plan to cover and an innovation of yours. An answer suggested by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

An action sociogram asks the people involved in answering a choice question to use the positioning of their body in an identified action space to indicate their choice. This may be done extemporaneously, or as a way to depict in action the results of choices made in a pen and paper exercise.¹ An action sociogram is different from an action social atom exploration in that the choices involve all group members and the same criterion² whereas the social atom is a depiction of one person's choices for group members, indicating nearness and distance from the perspective of one person toward a group of persons. A full group sociogram is a depiction of the composite of all group members' placement of every group member.

Using a sociogram for decision-making

At the time the question is posed a person engaged in making their choice known in action is primarily focused on the choices they are making for others. Then, within moments each person realizes if he/she is chosen by someone else or not. Both things are happening within a brief span of time...being chosen, not being chosen and choosing. As preparation, I often suggest quiet milling. Participants are asked to tune in to their inner thoughts and feelings about possible connections they hold with others in the here and now, and to allow those to surface and inform their next actions. I explain that the milling allows them a bit of time to become aware of the underlying pulls toward and away from others and to make a decision that fits in just this moment. Slowing the process down gains attention to what is happening internally. When all persons are choosing at the same time, it is public, but somewhat masked by the simultaneous choosing. It is hard to pay attention to everything that is happening and this reduces concern that people are watching you choose.

If the exercise is designed to get partners for an activity or a small group, I usually ask group members to stand and face the middle of the group, and not assume the choice process is over until every group member has settled into a pairing or a small group that fits the criterion and is a satisfactory connection for the moment. I facilitate pairings and may ask the entire group to go to another level of choice in order to explore if there is a higher degree of mutuality at the second, third or fourth level of choice.

Once the choices have been made, and the activity is to begin, it is important to allow time at the beginning of the activity for group members to share something of the feelings evoked by choosing and to complete any unfinished business within their connections. Group members are

encouraged to revisit the action sociogram experience and to bring up any topic which needs to be addressed to have closure from the experience. A question I have used to facilitate this is, "Let us talk about anything which was a surprise from this experience."

An innovation of mine from action sociograms

Our training group was using the action sociogram to explore first, second and third levels of choice on a criterion, "With whom do you wish to spend a half hour sharing with one another an important issue which came up during your teenage years." Following each sociogram, I asked the group members to go back into the sociogram, indicating the same choice, but this time, to use facial expression and body positioning and gestures to "dramatize" the choice. Then I called "freeze" and group members held their dramatic position. Then a group member could come out of the scene and look at it and propose what else this scene could be besides an action sociogram. For example, the person might say the "arrivals lounge at the airport at Christmas". Then the group immediately would begin to play out the scene in an improvised action.

This variation fit with the idea that sociometric choices are essentially fluid, changing often during the history of the group, changing with mood, changing with the flow from harmonic to conflictual moments in the lives of the individuals and in the group. Being able to escape from the reality of the immediate choice into fantasy also relieved some of the tension around making choices known. And, the scenes gave people an opportunity to move toward others and relate to those persons not immediately chosen on the level of choice being explored.

1 Hale, Ann E. (1985) "Action Sociometry: A Guide for Group Leaders" in *Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations*, Roanoke, VA, Royal Publishing Co., pp. 145-156.

2 Moreno, J.L. (1993) *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of sociometry, group psychotherapy and sociodrama*. Student edition., McLean, VA, American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, pp. 100-104.

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