

The Value of the Negative Choice by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

The positive star is the group's representative of the behaviors and attitudes that they most approve. Here is the seat of the status quo. In times of struggle and upheaval these roles and the accompanying attitudes and norms projected out into the group provide safety and reassurance.

The negative star has received rejections for their way of involving themselves in the group. I like to say that the negative star "has the most to teach the group about itself" particularly in terms of ways the group manages inclusion, differences, diversity, etc. The cutting edge for a group lies in the domain of maintaining authenticity AND receptivity.

Warming up to the Subject Using Action Methods

I organize the group for being in action using a few physical starters. Since I want to eventually explore various sociometric positions, I begin with the group split into two groups. I ask them to face one another and each do a chorus of "There ain't no flies on us."

The chorus goes like this:

There ain't no flies on us.

There ain't no flies on us.

There may be flies on some of you guys

But there ain't no flies on us!

Each group gets a turn, and then they repeat the exercise being outrageous in some of their movements and voice tone.

Next, I have each group member take a turn in the middle, saying and doing something that could get them rejected in this group. One person acts as scribe, and makes sure there is a clear description of the behavior being exhibited. Group members can have assistance if the actions require an auxiliary or sub-group to make the behavior understood

Using Action to Explore the Negative Star Position

An empty chair is placed in the action space and people are invited to address it or sit in it. Each person who wants a turn identifies one person they want to hear sharing from when they return to their seat.

The group then engages in an opinion map, placing comments they have about rejection or the negative star position anchored in place in the action space. Once a number of these comments are placed, the group takes time to "visit" that position and act "as if" they firmly believe this statement. Anyone else who is also visiting that space, engages in conversation with those gathered there. They are in full agreement. When a person is ready he or she moves to another position and "tries out" the position. The conclusion involves each person finding a placement for their own position in the here and now, and makes a statement or soliloquy from that position.

Further Comments on the Position

The negative star position is the person in the group who receives the highest number of negative choices at a time when the group is organizing small groups or partners for specific group activities. For most people this position is the greatly feared position. In fact, more people perceive a higher level of negative choices than is ever the case. People project onto group members a level of expectation for rejection which almost always is not supported by group data.

When a person holds that position due to a truthful response to a question, a person has an opportunity to (1) experience authentic choice; (2) find out the nature of that choice and specific reasons for receiving a negative choice; (3) be helped to know in a real way the degree to which a choice is about him or her, and the extent to which the choice has specifically to do with the person making the choice and their needs and feelings at a specific point in time; and (4) be able to be supported in a process which discloses to them rather than hide information necessary for a person to have connections here and now in the group which are based on as close to reality as it is possible for group members to be. As a group engages in choice-making over time, the fear of rejection lessens. It is replaced with confidence in managing complex interpersonal relationships and being able to hold a significant place in one's repertoire for truth telling and owning the basis for one's choices.

For an example of the positives which can result from the negative star position, a group comes to mind, one which struggled with a group member whose high anxiety expressed itself in chatter, interrupting people who were speaking, and overwhelming the group with details of the lives of people not known to them and tangential to the here and now group business. The person was one who had enormous difficulties in her day to day life and the group tolerated far more than is expected in order to accord her some relief from her worries. However, when the group was choosing partners to spend time with to get to know one another at a deeper level, she received a high level of rejections. In the pairing when people disclosed their reasons, one by one people told her they felt they would learn more about her, but that there would not be much time left over for them to speak, be understood and known at a deeper level. At the conclusion of the experience she stated that it was the happiest day of her life. She understood exactly what it was she was doing, and it was something that she could do something about. She knew she was anxious, but had not realized the way she had prevented connection through placing her anxiety between herself and other people. She calmed, relaxed, and changed her way of managing her fears and anxiety. The group members also learned that if the behavior returned they could simply ask, "Marion, is there something going on which has brought fears to the surface?"

There are persons who gather a number of rejections due to a sudden change in their behavior or contributions to the group. Rejection frequently is about something which is being withheld that the group values, for instance cooperation, or attention, or remaining present and involved..

Before I learned about role relief (moving on from a role when I needed a break, or was no longer challenged and engaged with the role) I would resort to actions which would get me rejected as a way to give up a role, and the responsibilities associated with it. I erroneously thought that I now owed the group something because they had chosen me for a role or accepted me in a leader position. It was a great relief to discover that I could give up a role, and help the group find a replacement or weather the period of adjustment when the role was not occupied. A group needs its positive stars to be able to support the group meeting its goals. No one would ever want to move into a positive star position if it was permanent. Helping group members cycle through a variety of positions creates more role flexibility, more spontaneity, the development of skills, and awareness of group process related to role theory.

The negative star, from their position on the periphery, has a unique position from which to view the group members who are more central and engaged with one another. Having an opportunity to reverse roles with each group position gives new insight to ways the group responds and accepts the members. And, each position is a window into the group, looking in and looking out.

The suffering which the rejected person feels is consequential and not to be taken lightly, or with the idea of "Well, great. What a wonderful opportunity for you." Rejection is a trigger for a person's personal narrative, placing a spotlight on worst fears, and aspects of one's life story which has been integrated along with their ways of coping. What gets unpacked in a group situation is the personal dialogue with oneself about who they are, what they can have, and whether or not they are likeable, lovable. Prior to engaging in sociometric choice-making activities involving the whole group, it is recommended that the group identify the strengths each person has for managing truth, handling conflict, releasing fears and the ability for attunement to oneself and others.

1 The opinion map was introduced to me in 1984 by Colin Martin at the School for Training of Trainers, Wellington Teacher's College, Wellington, New Zealand.

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