

Working with Fears of Sociometric Explorations
by Ann E. Hale, M.A.TEP

Sociometry question for the practitioner: March 3-16, 2006

You have a personal growth group which has been meeting weekly for ten months. They tell you they are reluctant to look at their connections to each other in answer to the offered action sociogram exploring the choices for supportive double. Several people say they don't want to be hurtful and are uncomfortable with conflicts they fear would arise. Describe ways you will respond and what sociometric processes you may propose, if any.

An answer suggested by Ann E. Hale, MA, TEP: March 16, 2006

I praise the group members for their statements of caring about the feelings of group members and their stated preference for working in ways which are supportive and kind. I remind the group of the personal conflicts we explore involving family members and other significant persons who are part of our ongoing life but not present in the group. I tell them that I see one of my roles as their facilitator to not only repair relationships from the past but to prepare for the reality that conflicts arise in all relationships, even ones here and now in our group. I say, "We have a supportive environment here. What better place to learn to stand in our truth." I talk about each person's need to know about the impact we really have on each other rather than having to guess, and sometimes imagining the worst. I tell them I have worked with groups who have had similar doubts about exploring intergroup relationships but had found it helpful to take small steps in this direction.

I begin to describe what I could see the group doing which would be a "small step." Right now I think it would be a good idea to begin working with the fear to hurt someone. We need to know what to do. I would like each of you to imagine that at some time in the group your feelings get hurt. One by one each of you will show the group what you imagine you will look like and what you are likely to do. Then, I want you to pick someone in the group to be you doing this very same behavior. YOU show the group what action approach and what words you want spoken in the event this happens. Each of us will watch what you do. Then you reverse back into your own position, and you choose someone from the group to play the role of a group member who makes the same approach as you have just shown. You go into those feeling of being hurt and receive the action you showed.

At the same time the group is involved in this activity I am making mental notes that the exercise is actually producing two action sociograms. The criteria are: (1) "whom do I choose to play me in a role play of me with hurt feelings"; and, "whom do I choose to make an approach to me should I have hurt feelings." Some group members will be aware these

choices are being made. Some will choose more broadly to accommodate people's need to be seen as helpful, and some will not have this awareness. After the exercise I like to follow up with an invitation to anyone who would like to be in the role of "making the approach" to try out the role. This gives opportunities to those less highly chosen to be in the role without making a big case out of not having been anyone's first choice to do this. If someone brings this up, you can have group members respond while you facilitate. It also gives you an opportunity to speak to one of the values of doing group wide sociometric exploration. "When we choose for roles in the group we rarely get a complete picture of the choices which might have been made for other people when the first person chosen accepts. Doing a sociometric exploration we can learn more about whether we are chosen or not and have a chance to learn more of the reasons. Following this group activity I will continue to offer other small steps.

The example above was chosen because the group members were afraid of hurting someone. After the exercise, group members will now have ways they can each help if this should occur. It helps to build confidence and trust in the group. And, the group leader has demonstrated being respectful, not overriding their reluctance, and able to move to an activity which immediately relates to one of their concerns. Moreno writes: (J. L. Moreno, Who Shall Survive, Beacon, NY, Beacon House, 1953, p.94) "Sociometric procedures should be greeted favorably as they aid in bringing to recognition and into realization the basic structure of a group. But such is not always the case. They are met with resistance and even with hostility by others. Therefore a group should be carefully prepared for the test before submitting to it." Also see, "Warmup to a sociometric exploration" (Thesis submitted as required for Certification as Director...by the Moreno Institute, 1974) by Ann E. Hale, Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, Vol. 27, no.1-4, 1974, p. 157-172.

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