Using Strong Sociometry: Some Guidelines and Techniques

With this article, I hope to renew interest in Moreno's original formulation of sociometry. Moreno's sociometry, which has been described as strong sociometry, is indeed strong medicine. Like strong medicine, it can be very effective when it is used correctly. Like strong medicine its side effects, anticipated and unanticipated, can cause problems. Therapists must cope with the possible attendant negative aspects, a topic with which Moreno failed to deal, to make the approach more viable.

The difficulties with the process seem to arise around the rejecting and being rejected aspects. Regardless of their recognition that both aspects of choosing are consistently part of day-to-day life and in spite of the fact that those involved in the process can understand this truth cognitively, those involved in making the choices manifest and focal find that this produces discomfort. Although therapists recognize that not all discomfort is dysfunctional, they still must address the problem of reducing the participants' discomfort to a utilitarian level so that the gains made from employing sociometry are not outweighed by the energy required to cope with the uneasiness.

Some Suggestions for the Use of Strong Sociometry

First, I propose some guidelines to help prepare people for the impact of Morenean sociometric techniques to facilitate group warm-up. Second, I suggest a specific model that can help those offering feedback to be more functional regarding their choices and help those receiving feedback to elicit supportive input. This model should promote more positive individual warm-ups. Third, I offer two techniques designed to help people invite feedback. They can be used as presented or as models for developing similar techniques to be applied with other, different groups. The suggestions are intended to help retain the strengths of the strong sociometric approach, as embodied in the original tripartite requirements suggested by Moreno (1953), and to reduce the discomfort and other possible adversive affects (e.g., reaction to sociometric rejection) to a manageable, functional level.

Guidelines for Group Warm-Up

All the participants should engage in an open and thorough discussion of the sociometric process. The therapist must present the steps that will be followed and the rationale behind each. Any foreseen problems or possible risks (e.g., that relationships may change as a result of the exchanges) should be

addressed. All those involved should have the opportunity to express any of their reactions and reservations. On the basis of the group input, modifications to the original plan, designed to minimize the anticipated negative consequences and maximize any positive outcomes, can be incorporated. The addition of this step underlines the importance of a group warm-up to Moreno's idea of attending to the individual's warm-up to making the choice. Although no guarantee should be or can be given that negative effects will not result, the final plan of procedure has become a group product and, hence, a group responsibility. Two ends will have been accomplished: The maximum possible group involvement/warn-up will be engendered, maximizing the group spontaneity (Moreno, 1951); concomitantly, the members will be more committed to making the process work to produce positive results.

In a similar vein, any participant should be allowed to halt the interaction at any time and address any qualms that may have arisen. This guideline is intended to induce a sense of shared control and shared responsibility. In this way, unforeseen eventualities can be accommodated. I have also found that agreeing ahead of time on how decisions regarding the process will be made—consensus, unanimity, majority, group leader synthesis—is also helpful.

Leaving enough time to complete the process is another essential. Scheduling a long session, agreeing that all will stay until adequate closure is reached, using more than one session for the interaction, or planning whatever else may be necessary to ensure a spontaneous outcome should be discussed as ground rules. However, total closure should never be promised. As they would with any learning process, participants will need time for assimilation on a personal basis, after the accommodation of new input has occurred (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Facilitative Communication Forms/Techniques

If or when the group decides that specific feedback about the reasons for choices would be helpful, providing a supportive, constructive vehicle can ameliorate much of the attendant discomfort. The aim is to allow the participants to convey the reasons behind their choices in a manner that is effective and encouraging to the recipients. This goal can be approached by focusing on the giver of the feedback, to help in framing the input in a beneficial way, or by concentrating on the recipient, to aid in eliciting constructive input and in taking in and processing the material. For more information on the group feedback process, the reader may wish to consult such sources as Jacobs (1974), Kivlighan (1985), Morran and Stockton (1980), or Morran, Stockton, and Bond (1991).

Placing a focus on the phrasing of behavioral feedback from the chooser to those chosen and those rejected, within the context of the choice, can be help-

ful and less threatening (Remer, 1984; Watson & Remer, 1984). Further, stressing the consequences of that behavior and the feelings engendered by it can enhance the impact of the communication. Remer and deMesquita (1990) suggested a six-stage process for delivering feedback that they based on the psychodramatic enactment curve (Hollander, 1978).

An example of a participant's response follows:

> I didn't choose you as someone from whom I would like feedback because, when you give me advice in group (behavior in context), I feel attacked (feeling) and I experience you as judging me (impact/consequence).

This type of input, introduced by an adequate lead-in (warm-up) and followed by supportive, active listening, usually allows the recipient to hear, take in, and, if necessary, clarify the feedback. Since the process is based on establishing a mutually respectful relationship and interaction, discomfort is reduced to a minimum.

Another effective way to ease the process of giving feedback is for the recipient (either one chosen or rejected) to invite it. For example, persons desiring feedback can confront the others and invite input and/or corrections by saying:

> When I give you advice, I imagine you are irritated with me, because I come across as judgmental. Is that right?

Similarly, sharing one's known or imagined concerns about the impact one has on others usually helps others to be supportive and constructive in their responses. Through group interaction, members can gain the knowledge necessary for personal and professional growth. Coupled with group support for making specific changes, an open individual can become a more effective person (and therapist).

Two Sociometric Techniques to Promote Feedback

The direct application of sociometry—producing a choice matrix and resultant sociogram, showing them to the group, and having the rationales behind the choices presented—can be an effective method for providing feedback about the choosers' warm-ups for the choices made. However, like an enactment without sufficient warm-up, such an approach can easily produce a lack of closure and the consequent unresolved issues. Therapists can design techniques meant to promote an open, reassuring atmosphere to help individuals in the group warm up to the task. These efforts would encourage a spontaneous exchange of feedback. The following are two examples that should produce these results.

The Living Sociogram

By numbering individuals and not indicating their genders, therapists can produce an anonymous sociogram from the group's choices. Using the sociogram of the group's choices, the therapist can assemble the group into a living sociogram. By focusing separately on the acceptances and the rejections, the therapist can give each member of the group the experience of each position. The most efficient way to accomplish this is to rotate through the positions—1 becomes 2, 2 becomes 3, and so on until 8 becomes 1. The therapist may incorporate action to enhance the effect so that a member is either pulling or pushing on the individuals to whom he or she is linked. The experience is then processed. The therapist can ask the group this question, which often leads to inviting feedback: Which position felt most familiar to you and why?

The Projective Sociogram

In the actual space of the room, the therapist can lay out a target sociogram, as described by Hale (1981) with the levels reflecting total nominations. Using the anonymous sociogram for reference, group members can place themselves at the level commensurate with the person who they believe they are. Positioning should not be mutually exclusive. For example, if three people project themselves to be at the 4 level, but there is actually only one group member at the 4 level, that is fine. Members should then be invited to say why they believe they belong where they have placed themselves, and they may invite confirmation from the rest of the group members, either collectively or individually. Again, the members of the group must process the reactions to approach closure.

Techniques such as these interface nicely with the feedback techniques mentioned previously. In addition to providing firsthand experiential learning of the personal aspects of the sociometric process, these techniques also demand that participants comprehend both the mechanics of sociometry and the theory behind them.

Conclusion

Moreno's (1951, 1953) sociometric techniques provide a potent means for promoting self-knowledge and interpersonal and intrapsychic insight. The therapist's awareness of possible negative side effects from the painful applications can alert him or her to guard against any possible harmful outcomes from this effective tool.

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