

Section 2: Practitioner's Corner

Practical Applications of Step-In Sociometry:

Increasing Sociometric Intelligence via Self-Disclosure and Connection

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This is a brief article on the historical, theoretical, and practical application of step-in sociometry. Instructions and guidelines for the use of democratic step-in are provided. Specific attention is paid to assisting individuals to learn how to deepen their connections with other group members. The pitfalls of using this tool and other adaptations of it are also included.

KEYWORDS: Sociometry; warm ups; group cohesion exercises; sociometric interventions; sociometric exercises.

This is a brief article on the historical, theoretical, and practical application of step-in sociometry. Step-in is a sociometric technique in which a group member or leader makes a statement or question and asks others members to step in the circle if the statement is true for them. A step-in question can range from something as simple and nonthreatening as “Who, like me, likes pizza?” to as complex and revealing as “Who, like me, was sexually abused by a parent when you were a child?”

HISTORY

Step-in sociometry is a relatively new addition to the sociometric toolbox. The origin of this technique is from the New Games movement developed by Andrew Fluegelman and colleagues in the 1970s (Fluegelman, 1976). It was originally called “A Cold Wind Blows” and has also been called “A Great Wind Blows,” “Fruit Basket Turnover,” and “Do You Love Your Neighbor?”

“A Cold Wind Blows” is a fairly similar game to musical chairs, except the number of chairs stays the same throughout the game—one less than the number of players. The chairs are organized in a circle facing inward, and each player sits in a chair. One player—designated as “it”—stands alone in the middle of the circle. In each round, “it” calls out any sentence, beginning with the words “a cold wind blows,” which refers to one or more players (e.g., “a cold wind blows for anyone

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wearing white"). All players for whom the cold wind blows (e.g., players wearing white) must vacate their chairs and attempt to find another seat. At the same time, "it" attempts to sit in a chair. The person who fails to find a chair becomes "it," and a new round of the game starts ("A Cold Wind Blows (game)," 2013).

This game was introduced to the psychodrama community by Regina Moreno and Miriam Zachariah during a workshop at Boughton Place in the early 1990s (M. Zachariah, personal communication, July 29, 2014). Ms. Zachariah is a Canadian psychodramatist and educator and had used this game for several years with school children. This game quickly spread throughout the psychodrama community and became a regular sociometric technique.

My best recollection is that I first became aware of this technique at an annual meeting, sometime in the early 1990s, of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama. However, I have no recollection of who did it or when. I do know that the session leader asked all the questions and invited group members to simply step-in to the center of the group. During the demonstration session, there was no discussion of when and how step-in sociometry might be used with a group, nor was there any mention of the necessity for the group members to share and process the step-in sociometry exploration after it was completed.

Over the years, I have made several refinements on this technique. Although some in our community have dismissed step-in sociometry as a "sophomoric" technique, when properly used it can be quite illuminating and often reveals and deepens the connections in a group. Like all experiential techniques, the value of step-in sociometry is determined by the skills and sensitivity of the individual leading the exercise.

PHILOSOPHY

Although there are many definitions of sociometry, the most simple is that sociometry is the measurement of interpersonal choices. However, sociometry as used by the field of psychodrama also means the assessment of groups and a set of intervention tools to enhance positive group dynamics.

For me, the larger picture of sociometry is to illuminate and create connections between people, to teach people that all choices are based on criteria (whether conscious or unconscious), to empower people to make conscious choices based on conscious criteria, and to educate people about how access to roles is obtained, how to increase their sociometric intelligence, and how to successfully navigate their way through group experiences.

For much of recorded history, humans have been oriented to tribal customs with the focus of maintaining the tribe and demonizing or scapegoating nontribal members. This tribal orientation is at the root of most wars, pogroms, and crusades. In reading or watching the news, we see the remnants of tribalism internationally (the warring tribes of Uganda and the Middle East, and within the United States, Christians and non-Christians).

When J. L. Moreno stood before the statue of Jesus Christ in Chemnitz, he too was faced with a decision, "How would I choose: was my identity the universe, or was it with the particular family or clan from which I had sprung" (Marineau, 1989, p. 28). Just as Jesus Christ had done before him, Moreno chose to be inclusive and identify with the universe rather than with a particular family or clan.

PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS

Choosing the Step-In Approach

For step-in sociometry, the group leader first decides whether to use a democratic approach (i.e., group members choose the criteria) or a totalitarian approach (i.e., the director chooses the criteria). Hale (1981) stated that whenever possible, group members must not only give informed consent, but they should also develop the issues and the criteria that will be used in the written or action sociometric exercise.

Personally, I consider the totalitarian approach to be less adequate for two reasons: (a) it is voyeuristic and disempowers the group and group members, and (b) if the director is providing the criteria, it may be difficult to monitor and maintain therapeutic alliances with each group member. For example, if a member of the group proposes a criterion, the leader can monitor the other group members' nonverbal and verbal responses to the criterion and can make interventions to support each group member rather than "defend" the stated criterion. It is also highly likely that if a group leader selects the criteria for the step-in sociometry, the leader will be less alert to group members' readiness to engage with these criteria.

Introducing Step-In to the Group

Prior to initiating the step-in sociometry, group members are given a brief explanation of sociometry and of the value of step-in sociometry.

Moreno hypothesized that the smallest unit of humankind is not the individual but the social atom (Buchanan, 1984). The social atom is composed of all of an individual's interpersonal relationships (dead or alive, real or fantasy), which are essential to the individual's daily living. The social atom is often diagrammed in three concentric circles: the inner circle represents those persons to whom the individual feels emotionally connected; the middle circle is composed of those persons with whom the individual wishes to have a relationship; and the third, the outer circle, is composed of those people who are acquaintances.

After an introduction to sociometry, I begin with the following:

Today, in this group exercise, we will explore the sociometric connections in this group. Step-in sociometry reveals the hidden connections in a group. One of the goals of the psychodramatic process is to highlight that people are more alike and connected with each other than they are different and to make those invisible connections visible.

Instructions for Democratic Step-In Sociometry

My instructions are that only those persons who are willing to share about themselves can ask a question in step-in sociometry. When a person steps into the circle, I ask them to say, "Who, like me, . . . ?" I instruct the other group

members that, if they are willing to disclose and connect, they should step in and join hands with the person in the inner circle. I also instruct the group members that if they have not experienced the issue or do not want to self-disclose at this time, they should stay in the outer circle. I remind the group members that we are certain that those in the inner circle have experienced this issue, but we do not know for certain that those in the outer circle have not also experienced this issue. This instruction is important because it stresses that the decision to self-disclose or not to disclose is voluntary rather than forced, and it allows each group member to disclose when the sociometry is strong enough to support the self-disclosure.

I remind the group members in the inner circle that those with them in the inner circle have an experiential understanding of the role or issue, and those group members in the outer circle have a cognitive understanding or an understanding formed by witnessing someone experiencing a similar role or issue. I would also caution group members in the inner circle that while they may share a role or an experience with those in the inner circle, that people may process issues and roles differently

I usually demonstrate the first step-in, and I do only one step-in. I do not step-in for the other questions. I ask that each group member ask one step-in so that everyone gets a turn. If it is a new group or there are lots of newcomers, I focus on low-risk things but things that would be important for the group to know about one another. Some examples of my low-risk step-in questions are (and are true for me): “Who, like me, is an only child?” “Who, like me, lost a parent when they were young?” “Who, like me, struggles to balance work and play?”

If the group is seasoned, safe, and has developed trust with one another, I demonstrate a higher risk criterion (what is a risk for one person may not be so for another) question: “Who, like me, had a parent who was an alcoholic?” “Who, like me, has ever been depressed?” and “Who, like me, pays so little attention to my physical body that it can cause me physical problems?”

As the director, I remain active in the monitoring and teaching of group process during the step-in sociometry. John Mosher (2010) has often stated that one of the purposes of therapy and sociometry is to make the client’s world bigger. Therefore, I give a mini lecture on belonging and not belonging (inclusion and exclusion). If we want to belong, we can make our criteria broader, but if we want to not belong or to exclude people, we can make our criteria narrower. I remind them we do this every day in our conversations and connections with people through either being inviting and open or closed and distant.

To demonstrate belonging and not belonging, I model several different examples for the group and put them into action. I usually begin by using a true criterion but one that is not so emotionally laden that the teaching is overwhelmed by the emotions. For example, in a group of adults, I would explain that moderate inclusiveness criteria might be, “Who, like me, lost a parent when they were a child?” A broader criterion that might result in more

people coming into the inner circle would be, “Who, like me, has had a parent who has passed over?” whereas a narrower criterion that would result in fewer people coming into the group would be, “Who, like me, lost their mother when they were eight years old?”

If a person chooses to step in with a criterion that is limiting, I ask if he or she is open to making the circle bigger. For example, a person may step in and say, “Who, like me, lost a parent by suicide when they were five years old?” I teach the group that by broadening statements, they can still speak their truth while gaining connections to others. I might suggest they ask, “Who, like me, has lost a loved one through suicide?” If the person does not want to make the issue broader so that others can join with him or her, it tells me a lot about that person and the group.

It is equally true that some group members try to connect with everyone, so at times I would ask a broadly connected group member to make the statement more intimate and limiting. For example, for a person who said, “Who, like me, is sometimes unhappy?” I would suggest he or she specify additional criteria for the state of unhappiness. For example, the group member might reframe the question to say, “Who, like me, is unhappy that they are single?”

Group members often enjoy practicing making statements broader or narrower to see how they experience the group differently and also so they become more conscious of how they invite connection or create isolation.

In general, I find that one round or at the most two rounds of step-in sociometry is rich enough for a long session of processing and sharing. If the sharing has been deep, intimate, and touching, I limit the step-in to one round.

Sharing and Closure

Frankly, my biggest problem with step-in sociometry is that it usually creates too much disclosure too soon. Premature self-disclosure may be addressed by having the group leader caution group members to be conscious of the developmental stage of the group (i.e., opening session or termination session vs. middle stages of the group) and to match their self-disclosures to the trust and safety that has been created in the group. The group leader can also instruct group members to be conscious in selecting criteria that are “safe enough” to disclose to other group members, and when in doubt to refrain from self-disclosure. The group leader can remind group members that instant intimacy may feel good in the moment, but group members might regret their disclosures if there is not adequate time to process their self-revelatory statements and to make stronger connections with other group members. Finally, if the group leader feels that the group members are disclosing too much too soon, the leader can freeze the step-in sociometry exploration and begin sharing and processing of the disclosures.

Immediately after the step-in, I reserve time for sharing and closure of the step-in sociometry. Some of the standard questions I ask during the process are, “How did you experience the step-in sociometry?” “Did you experience any

discomfort or feel forced to participate?” “After your self-disclosures, how do you feel about self-disclosing?” It is essential that group members have an opportunity to discuss the process and share their feelings about engaging in the process. It has not been unusual to hear group members state that they felt nervous or uncertain about disclosing information in the group. If the step-in has been highly self-revealing, I schedule more time for group members to process their statements and feelings so that adequate containment is given to the individual and the group.

Usually, group members spend a lot of time discussing their sharing, the impact their sharing has on them, and the issues that arise when they share intimately with others.

Pitfalls

There are also several challenges that can arise from using step-in sociometry. Some of the most common challenges are (a) superficial step-ins, (b) feeling of forced self-disclosure, and (c) unanticipated regression or abreaction.

When a group appears to be asking “superficial” questions for the step-in sociometry (i.e., “Who, like me, wears contact lens?” or “Who, like me, loves pizza?”), the group leader must first ascertain whether this is a trust and safety issue or if the criteria are related to real life issues. For example, a person who loves pizza may be looking for someone else in the group to share a pizza. If so, that is a question about inclusion and connection rather than a superficial criterion. However, if the person was just “wondering” who else loves pizza, it may be an indication that safety and trust are low for that person. If so, the group leader needs to return to issues of safety, confidentiality, and trust building. Group sociometry, like a chain, is only as strong as the weakest link.

Occasionally, a group member may express feeling forced or compelled to disclose during the step-in because of the integrity, vulnerability, and honesty of other group members. However, now that group member reports feeling exposed, vulnerable and frightened, and having regrets about the self-disclosure.

If this occurs, the group director can slow down the sharing and processing and have the “vulnerable” group member connect and establish eye contact with each member of the group. If this does not seem sufficient, the group leader can instruct the vulnerable group member to recreate the disclosure moment and ask for an “aside” or a “soliloquy.” The group leader can also encourage the other group members to share what it was like for each of them to self-disclose on this criterion, and how it feels to be vulnerable and disclose sensitive information to others. Adequate time and attention should be given to any vulnerable group member who “regrets” self-disclosing so that any feelings of shame or isolation from other group members can be dissolved.

If any untoward event (e.g., unanticipated regression or abreaction) happens during the step-in sociometry, it is essential to remember that the

group process is far more important than the group activity. Therefore, the director must focus and contain the emergent issue and attend to each group member, before and if continuing the step-in sociometry. The containing double is an excellent technique to use when unanticipated regression or abreaction occurs (Hudgins & Drucker, 1998).

OTHER ADAPTATIONS

Each year at Psychodrama Summer Camp, which Nina Garcia and I have been conducting for 24 years, we use two variations on step-in sociometry. The first is on opening night, when we invite each group member, one at a time, to step out and name an activity that she or he would like to share with other group members. Some examples are, "Who would like to go snorkeling with me?" or "Who would like to do yoga on the beach with me?"

On Sunday evening at Psychodrama Summer Camp, we traditionally use a parachute for run-through, crawl-through, or dance-through step-ins. The group forms a circle and holds the multicolored parachute at waist level so group members can see one another. Then, one at a time, while standing on the outside and supporting the parachute, a group member makes a step-in statement (e.g., Who likes cats? Who collects seashells? Who, like me, is a grandmother?) and runs under the parachute to the opposite side. The group members who do not meet the criteria raise the parachute high to the ceiling so the group members who do share the criteria can move under the parachute.

In recent years, I have also witnessed hands-up step-in when the leader of a large group asks a question and persons raise their hands if they agree with the statement. For example, "Raise your hand if this is your first time here at the annual meeting."

SUMMARY

Step-in sociometry is a valuable sociometric tool that empowers group members to explore their own sociometric connections in a group, develop greater self-disclosure, and create new levels of connection for themselves and others.

NOTE

Regina Moreno, BA, MA, has been an educator for more than 47 years and has used sociodrama, role training, and sociometric choice techniques with elementary, middle school, high school, and college-level students. She is currently an educational consultant training teachers and administrators in the use of role-play and conflict resolution strategies and is dealing with student conflicts and bullying issues. She is also the daughter of J. L. Moreno and Florence Moreno.

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