

Psychodramatically Becoming Your “Future Doctor Self”: A DSW First Year Immersion Session
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Sociometry, Psychodrama, and Social Work have considerable overlap in their history, theory, and philosophy - nevertheless, they remain mostly segregated. Jacob L. Moreno, the founder of sociometry and psychodrama and a pioneer in group psychotherapy, created a philosophical system with many parallels to social work including conceptualizing the person in their social environment, advocating for social justice, emphasizing relationships, highlighting the worth of each individual, and promoting mutual aid in groups. Moreno actually coined the terms “group psychotherapy” and “group therapy” in Philadelphia in 1931. His sociometric system focuses on the interpersonal dynamics within groups and society while his psychodramatic approach uses experiential methods to externalize the intrapsychic realities of an individual. Sociometry and psychodrama as complementary group psychotherapy approaches investigate the individual’s psychodynamics within the sociodynamics of their social network and society.

While sociometry and psychodrama receive almost no mention in social work education (only two psychodrama electives currently exist within the entire American social work academic system), group work has always been a component of the social work field. Historically, concentrations in group work were offered in nearly 75% of social work degree programs in the 1960s, while today it is less than 5% of programs that offer a group work concentration. Group work in social work education significantly declined over the past six decades, while group work’s demand in practice increased exponentially. Most social workers report being expected to facilitate groups of some sort (therapy, supervision, community, training, organizational, education, etc.) in their field placements and careers but are not receiving any, or adequate, education in group work. Group work experts criticize many for being unable to engage the group-as-a-whole and instead doing individual case work or individual therapy in a group setting.

Sociometry and psychodrama provide social workers with experiential group-as-a-whole mutual aid processes that can be adapted for use with any topic, any population, and any group setting. These approaches are all action-based - moving beyond words into a holistic experience that integrates the body, psyche, social, and spiritual into the group process. To portray the power of these tools, sociometry and psychodrama vignettes from a session with the incoming DSW students on their immersion week will be depicted.

Considering that incoming DSW students were meeting each other in person for the first time this week, various sociometry tools were utilized to help the group uncover the various unseen connections between group members. After multiple sociometric explorations and a deepening of interpersonal connections the group was warmed-up to go deeper. Three empty chairs were positioned in the center of the room to represent “the DSW degree and

dissertation,” “the future self as a doctor,” and “family, friends, and colleagues”. Participants were invited to spontaneously sit in one of these chairs, role reversing with one of these roles, and verbalize a negative or positive messages.

Messages from the DSW degree and dissertation were verbalized including - “I am too big for you to complete,” “you were meant to create me,” “I am the change you will create in the world,” - as these were articulated, others students raised their hands indicating their connection to the messages from their peers. Towards the end of the session, the energy shifted towards the future self role and students began to role reverse with themselves in the future as doctors of clinical social work. From this future self role, they spoke to themselves today offering encouragement, validation, and insight - “I am proud of you,” “you are right where you are meant to be,” “this DSW process will be tough, but you will succeed”. Some students articulated their messages in other languages - while the rest of the group didn’t cognitively understand the content of the message, the emotional content was clearly received. As we moved towards closure and integration, students began clapping enthusiastically for each other’s messages.

Through this experiential process the incoming cohort identified similarities, deepened group cohesion, and further integrated a sense of collective purpose together. The experience of role reversing with one’s future self provides a taste of achieving a long-term goal while sharpening one’s vision of that goal. The psychodramatic process offers groups the opportunity to revisit the past, travel into the future, explore parts of self, and practice interpersonal situations in the safety of the group and the surplus reality of the psychodrama stage.