Social Work and Sociometry:
Integrating History, Theory, and Practice

Scott Giacomucci, MSS, LCSW, CTTS, CET III

The Philadelphia Training School for Social Work was founded in 1908, and the field of social work began to take root in Philadelphia. While at the same time in Vienna, Jacob L. Moreno's ideas of sociometry, psychodrama, and group psychotherapy were beginning to emerge. Social work practice evolved with an emphasis on seeing the individual contextually within their social environment and in 1917, Mary Richmond published her famous book "Social Diagnosis". In the same year back in Austria, J.L. Moreno, while working at Mittendorf refugee camp, had assessed and diagnosed the social (dis)configuration of the camp as the cause of many of its troubles and formally recommended that the camp be restructured "by means of sociometric analysis" (Marineau 2014, pg. 55). This is seen by many as a foundational event in the development of sociometry, which Moreno later defined as "the inquiry into the evolution and organization of groups and the position of individuals within them" (1934). In 1925, Moreno moved to New York City and founded the Journal of Sociometry which was published for 40 years by the American Sociological Association.

The parallels in both history and theory between social work and sociometry are impossible to deny. Our PA state licensing board (2006) emphasizes the importance of continuing education that enhances "the social worker's knowledge and practice skills related to helping people achieve adequate and productive personal, interpersonal and social adjustments in their individual lives, in their families and in their community." This directive seems to reflect the practice of sociometry, which is the qualitative and quantitative study of interpersonal relationships with clinical applications that provide direct interventions to change the nature of relationships within the group. Although social work practice and sociometry appeared to have developed as parallel processes, they have remained mostly segregated. My intent is to show where they intersect and how social workers can be more effective by integrating the rich knowledge and practice of sociometry into our field.

The clinical application of sociometry includes various action methods for exploring the relational dynamics within a group. These sociometric tools move the group process beyond words, helping participants (and the facilitator) to uncover valuable information about the group and individuals' position within it. There are far too many sociometric tools to outline or even introduce here (see references for further reading!) so I have chosen one of my favorites to describe in detail.

"Step-In Sociometry" or "Circle of Similarities" as it is often referred to, is one of many action methods for exploring similarities within a group. It provides an efficient process for highlighting shared experience or identity between participants and can be modified for use with any content.

To begin this sociometric exploration, instruct all group members to form a standing circle. Next, inform the group that each person will have an opportunity to make a statement about themselves while stepping into the circle. When other group members identify with the statement, they are to step into the circle as well. After a moment of acknowledging the other group members whom have also stepped-in, everyone returns to the circle and the next person makes their statement. This allows group members to *see* who can relate to them and allows other group members the opportunity to indicate that they relate without having to share about it (of course you can instruct them to share too).

In my inpatient groups at Mirmont Treatment Center, I often utilize this tool to help clients recognize what they have in common beyond their experience of addiction and trauma I direct each participant (works with any size group) to state something about themselves that is not related to their addiction or trauma. From here, they can begin to make connections with each other based on positive criteria rather than continuing patterns of connecting around negative criteria. Other ways of using this tool include having group members acknowledge their defense mechanisms, strengths, consequences from addiction, or future hopes. With each criteria, every group member can have a turn to make a statement about themselves related to it.

Step-in sociometry can also be used in educational or group supervision settings. With students, I instruct them to state their favorite counseling theories, aspects of social work, areas of interest, or career goals. In the classroom, this provides me with a sense of the group members' interests and allows me to tailor my teaching to meet their needs while also discovering shared connections.

Sociometry is a science by, for, and of the people (Moreno 2014) offering a variety of action methods for exploring and changing group dynamics. My sociometry and psychodrama training has been the greatest contribution to my competence as group facilitator. I encourage other social workers to pursue training in sociometry and psychodrama to expand their clinical skills facilitating groups.

See www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/sociombibliog.html for a comprehensive list of sociometry reading.

References:

Moreno, J.L. (1934). *Who Shall Survive?: A New Approach To The Problem Of Human Interrelations*. Washington, D.C.: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co.

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The Pennsylvania State Board of Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists, and Professional Counselors (2006). *§ 47.35. Standards for courses and programs*. Retrieved from: https://www.pacode.com/secure/data/049/chapter47/s47.35.html