

Across Generations VS The Moment.... Genogram VS sociogram + Action

Let us imagine a three person team of family therapists, and a troubled family consisting of grandparents and a son. Two persons weren't there, one alive a grandson and another from the middle generation who met a violent death.:

They have lost one child and find they could lose another. Consider the stress and pain, the inner turmoil of guilt, recrimination and panic. Our immediate task is to form a preliminary interpretations, and work from there.

Group Process: Our leader wasn't there when our session started. He gave us time to get acquainted. We reviewed external facts about ourselves in the usual way we do in social situations, without reference to how or why we're here on serious business. We expect to drop masks as trust develops. To facilitate matters I share in minor ways, making myself vulnerable. We show we have some things in common. and welcome their doing the same with us.

The leader returns to tell the family about his way of preparing them for what lay ahead, so that they may expect to do some role playing as our exploratory method. It turns out that this is not completely new to at least one person he's seen before.

When I am in charge, I normally begin with a few sentences about how we get acquainted through focusing on relationships, and then I follow through in interviewing someone in the 'empty' chair as if he were one of the more important persons in his life. This may open the door to encounter with persons present, but it more likely would lead to the two persons absent. If so, the choice of the one who had recently died provides an opportunity to finish the unfinished business with him in a surplus reality scene bringing him back from the dead. The living, but absent one would give the family the surplus reality opportunity to say whatever they chose to say to him. I use a protagonist's spontaneous comments as springboard for further inquiry].

The Emerging Picture: A genogram would be helpful here in showing us the family across generations. We expect to find triangles within each generation overlapping second and third generations. It is usual to impose an earlier pattern on a later one, but without a full awareness of how the older pattern factors in. Triangle analysis may even stretch beyond people to include an illness or a homicide at one of the corners, One must be familiar with triangle analyses with people before using it in this exotic way.

Dealing with a family calls for the family therapy staple, the genogram. Persons more familiar with psychodrama speak of the 'sociogram,' which we've come to do in action, but sociometry began on paper and blackboard with groups before we applied it to families. Sociometry requires a 'criterion,' a the basis for diagramming approach, rejection, ambivalence and indifference interactions among group members at a given moment. This is no popularity contest, but refers to a preference for doing something with or not doing something with available group members, with every expectation well have an opportunity to go ahead and do it. Sociograms are more specific, whereby the director addresses an immediate situation, whereas genograms are more general and require a family therapist's sustained interaction. Most commonly, when we work with a single individual in the absence of others he has in mind, we call this a 'perceptual sociogram.' We've already been doing those without labelling. Of course an observer or a witness may do this, but it is more effective when exploring the point of view of a protagonist. Furthermore, paper representation is easier to read when one uses technical lines and symbols.

Action Sociograms are normally done with the actual people. The group selects an Arranger to place each group member in various actions or postures about the room, without giving away the bias for his arrangement. When done, at last he places himself within his scheme. Now the group members tell how they react and how they feel, maybe make a suggestion on how the arrangement may be improved. The arranger makes no comment till all have responded in some way. Then he explains what he had in mind and the group members respond to his interpretation. Obviously this takes a whole session and lays bare the group dynamics.. A purely perceptual action sociogram may be done with furniture, or with persons present representing characters they don't know. This gives us one person's point of view in a more graphic way, inviting comments from others.

Let us look at how we have arranged ourselves. This was one of Doctor Moreno's favorite warm ups. The Moreno's had a psychodrama stage on West 78th Street in New York City, where they held psychodrama demonstrations. Celebrities would often drop by. A delegate from the UN came to participate, and was so impressed, he came back a week later with a male friend. Doctor Moreno remembered that he sat one seat removed from the aisle, as if he were expecting someone to join him, though no one came. When the man from the UN returned the following week to the very same chair, the seat next to him was occupied by a well dressed man on the aisle to his right. Moreno was speaking about relationships, and he brought the group focus to the pair, He bantered with the returnee, asked if he knew the person on the right, guessed he was the one who wasn't there in the flesh the previous week. "So there's a relationship here. Is there any hanky panky going on between you?" A few gasped, but Moreno's 'tele,' that is, his rapport was fully established. The reply: "No, I'm afraid not. Should we look into it?" The relieved group laughed, and Moreno continued making his way about the theater. As always Moreno was generations ahead of the times. What has become routine on talk shows was unheard of in the early 1960's.

Back to the 'imaginary' session at the outset the grandfather ended up to my right, while the grandmother sat at my left, and their son sat close to her at her left. Was grandmother supporting her son, or was the son supporting his mother? Or both? Here is a triangle before us, with the husband at a distance from wife and son. His wife cautions him not to make the deceased son "the bad guy." The history behind this may have to do with that late son's negative identity, which father had made a deliberate effort at acceptance, but in his wife's view he hasn't been entirely successful in modifying his attitude enough. Here we have a photo showing father as outsider to his wife and his son. Very likely this successor to another triangle with wife and deceased son.

There is the complicating factor of meth-amphetamine. Was one absentee on it but not the other? Were they on at the same time---probably not. But the living absentee surely swallowed a handful of potent drugs afterwards in an effort to suicide. Was it a gesture, or was it for real? How was he saved? How do we process the suicidal behavior? Is he currently in treatment for his grief and his guilt? Suicide is an angry deed masquerading as depression. His behavior says, "This is how I hurt you and absolve me."

Addendum: Medical details can be illuminating. But whose behavior are we explaining. the departed or the survivor? One can do a future projection of the results of the atopsy. We learn who the members of the group identify with. From a single session we have an abundance of issues to address. Perhaps in the follow up we can do an action sociogram, or if that's too much too soon, work out a genogram on the blackboard. **Donell Miller**