

The Social Atom Diagram

As Social Atom information is gathered, it can be displayed in a number of ways. The traditional method, used by Moreno, is having the patient use a pencil to draw the Social Atom on a piece of paper. Moreno asked the patient to draw circles to represent women and triangles to represent men. Moreno also had the patient diagram his emotional relationship with the figures in his Social Atom. This tele was represented by drawing a plus sign (+) for positive tele, a minus sign (–) for negative tele, and a dotted line for indifference.

Some therapists ask patients to connect themselves and the other individuals using solid lines to indicate positive tele and broken lines for negative tele. Other therapists allow patients to select their own colors and shapes to represent the significant figures – a method used mostly in psychodramatic group therapy, although it can be applied in individual therapy.

A different method – the Streetlight Sociometry – was developed in 1979 by Marko Whiteley (cited in Hall, 1981). This approach shows the choices people make by means of a color code which is found in everyday life – the traffic light. This is accomplished by using color-coded push-pins with key tags (pink for females, blue for males) and affixing them to a corkboard. The streetlight sociometry system can be applied to every sociometric procedure, the sociometric test, the role diagram, encounter, and the various Social Atom explorations.

In my work in a psychiatric hospital, I charted Social Atoms in the simplest and most easily available way. I began by explaining to the patient that the purpose of the

Social Atom is to help me, the therapist, understand the patient's world. I explained that it is a diagram which gives a picture of the here and now. I then said to the patient: "Think about all the significant people in your life. It is likely that you have positive or negative feelings towards them, or you may feel indifferent. These people may be alive or dead, real or imaginary."

This initial explanation about the Social Atom is also the beginning of the relationship with the patient. It is therefore necessary to devote a great deal of time and attention to it. The patient is about to expose his inner world and must not be overwhelmed. Upon commencing a study of an individual's Social Atom, it is important to declare the purpose of the exercise and to provide clear and concise instructions for obtaining a reliable picture. For patients suffering from serious mental illness, the explanation must be as clear as possible. It may be necessary to repeat the instructions several times. The patients must be allowed to take a break if needed, and must be given plenty of encouragement.

After the introductory explanation, the therapist gives the patient a pencil and a blank sheet of paper, and the following instructions:

Using this paper and pencil, I want you to draw your Social Atom. Use triangles to represent males and circles to represent females. First place yourself on the paper, anywhere that feels right to you. Now write the word "me" on your name on that figure. Now place your important relationships as close to or as far away from yourself as you feel them to be. Your feelings about any of these people may be either positive – good and loving, or

negative – bad and angry. Draw the person or persons towards whom you have the stronger feelings closer to you. Remember, these feelings may be either positive or negative. You may also want to include someone who is deceased. Use a dotted line to draw a triangle for deceased males and a dotted line to draw a circle for deceased females. Place the initials or first names of each of the people in the shapes which represent them.

If the patient is distraught or unfocused, he can be asked to first draw up a list of the significant figures in his life, and then to place them in the Social Atom.

The Interview

The Social Atom as drawn by the patient does not stand on its own. The interview is an integral part of it. In the few studies conducted, researchers derived certain constants which help the therapist analyze the Social Atom, such as placement of figures, size of figures, and so on, which will be described later in this work. However, for the therapist to have a reliable Social Atom, it is necessary to conduct an interview which will substantiate and provide additional information about how the patient's perceives his inner world and the figures around him.

In discussing the Social Atom with the patient, it is best to begin with the supportive figures. This will help create a relaxed and supportive atmosphere in the interview. The strength of the Social Atom in revealing hidden issues in such a simple and measurable manner requires the therapist to act with utmost caution and empathy towards the patient. As soon as the patient feels confidence and empathy, his anxiety will diminish and he will open up in the interview.

During the interview the sociometry of the Social Atom is also explored – who selects whom, who is close to whom, who is distant from whom. This aspect sometimes reveals the deepest dramas in the patient’s family and life. The sociometry of the Social Atom shows tensions and sources of energy. From this the therapist can determine the goals of treatment, which will aim to establish harmony in the patient’s Social Atom.

The following is a model for an interview. Questions must be creative and belong to events of the here and now. As the patient draws the Social Atom, the therapist can make a numbered list of the figures (using the names or initials) in the order in which the patient produces them. In my own work I did not usually make such a list while the patient drew the Social Atom, but rather asked about the order during the interview and allowed the patient to relate to the figures in any desired order.

When the patient finishes his work on the Social Atom, examine how he feels “here and now” by asking, “How do you feel about yourself right now?”

Exposing the patient’s inner world stirs up a mixture of emotions to which the therapist must relate. The Social Atom exercise sometimes has a calming effect on a patient, and sometimes it agitates and infuriates. I, however, did not experience the latter during the drawing of the Social Atom or the interview, not even with the most difficult patients. Rather, I found that patients were happy to share their world with me and were pleased that someone was relating to them intimately.

Moving on to the Social Atom, the questions should now focus on getting to know the figures which appear in it.

Ask for the identity of each person represented. “Who is this?” The answer may be a relative, friend, another patient, someone who lives with the patient, a work colleague, a sexual partner or someone to whom the patient is sexually attractive, a fantasy, a delusion.

“How long have you known this person?” The answer will define the duration of the relationship. “How often do you see this person?” “How do you feel about this person right now?” “Do you like him, dislike him, or feel indifferent and not care about him?” “Did you include this person by choice, because you desire the relationship, or are there other reasons for including him?”

Inquire about the placement and proximity of figures in respect to the placement of the patient’s own self on the page. Question the placement of figures above and below, and to the right and left of the patient’s own self.

Say to the patient, “you have drawn so-and-so closer to you,” and ask, “Do you feel closer to him than perhaps to so-and-so whom you’ve drawn farther away or over here?”

Inquire about the size of figures as compared to the patient’s own self.

Question the patient about any erasures, overlapping figures, reversals of symbols, changes in shape, outlining, shading.

Analysis

The Social Atom permits observation of the patient’s sociometry. Moreover, it provides a picture of the here and now, and should be viewed in that perspective. The Social Atom can serve as a useful vehicle for diagnostic and treatment purposes because of its strength in revealing a current picture of the patient’s condition. It can thus be used