

Using Sociodrama and Sociometry to Create Group Environments

Peter Howie, BS, TEP

The Moreno Collegium for Human Centered Learning, Research and Development

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of sociodrama and how it is utilized in large and small group environments. Historical underpinnings, divergent notions on how sociodrama is defined and the rationale for sociodrama are examined and discussed. A working definition of sociodrama is given in conjunction with framework and structure, coupled with techniques to facilitate a sociodrama in a large group environment. A case illustration is utilized to highlight the application of the sociodramatic method.

Sociodrama is a methodology applicable to all sizes of groups. It can be used for exploratory and investigatory purposes or for the purposes of problem solving. It was developed by J. L. Moreno as a means of creatively working with some of the very difficult inter- group and intercultural dilemmas of the early and mid 20th century. In brief, sociodrama addresses multiple social justice problems, i.e. race relations, discrimination, to mention a few. Sprague (1997) states "*sociodrama arose from the upheaval and horror of World War I*" as cited in Wiener (1997). Moreno said he initially developed sociodrama as an approach to help people overcome some of their own cultural rigidities and create some collective catharsis to allow room for fresh approaches and responses (Moreno, 1943). Moreno wrote about the area of human relationships as though there was a psychological geography of human society; a real and measurable social structure (Moreno, 1937). Moreno (1953, 1993), made a great attempt to formalize these ideas by the methodological formulation of *sociometry* in his work *Who Shall Survive?* Sociodrama, according to Moreno's conception, is a way of combining sociometry with dramatic processes and techniques in order to make social change possible (Moreno, 1943). Moreno saw sociodrama as a way to engage people in specific dramatic activities in order to evoke discussions, explorations and role-playing of solutions to conflictual issues (Kellerman, 1998).

Sociodrama, as defined by Moreno (1953, 1993), starts from within the present audience. It is intended to be educational, clarifying and energizing to all members, to serve as a stimulus to spontaneity, creativity, love and empathy, as a check and balance for cultural tensions and hostilities arising from local or world-wide events, and as a means for social catharsis and integration (p. 88). Sociodrama as a methodology is still in development (Browne, 2005). Because of this, the philosophical foundation of sociodrama has not been extensively formulated and this writing is largely focused on application rather than theory. According to Browne (2005), sociodrama addresses educational, organizational, social justice, and governmental problematic dilemmas to enhance social change.

For this paper I have defined sociodrama as “a learning method that creates deep understanding of the social systems that shape us individually and collectively” (Browne, 2005, p. 9). The typical sociodramatic method is three hours (in length) and demonstrated in the following case example. The following portrayal of a sociodrama session shows how sociodramatic methodology can be used in a large-scale action investigation. Within this session, the utilization of sub-groups and the entire group (whole group) are investigated focusing on group role-plays centering on community interest and concern. Large groups can be daunting and it has been my experience that facilitating groups does not require the group leader to be frightening as well. The process requires group members to join in smaller groups (sub-groups) of half a dozen, identify and discuss their “main concerns” around issues at hand and then organize them into a hierarchy of importance. This representation of “main concerns” is placed out on the floor with alternate answers at either end described by the facilitator.

Case Example: Sociodrama Applied

The group and its purpose

The group is made up of 45 middle and senior ranked science professionals, highly educated, from the State Government Department with a mission of monitoring and developing policy around the natural environment, including global warming. We are in a large open training room in a different building from where they work. It is light and airy and has great views from the 13th floor. The ages range from mid 20s to mid 60s. There are a disproportionate number of men and women under 40 which resulted from the bias in science education, which until recently had discouraged women from pursuing a career in science. Below 40 the gender split is roughly even. I am introducing them to sociodrama and demonstrating how it can be used productively with such a contentious issue as global warming. They are coming as part of a regular monthly three hour organized professional development seminar. Many group members are world leaders in the area of global warming. These participants know of each other and sometimes work as colleagues, but overall most are strangers to one another.

The group warm up

I introduce myself and take no more than a minute to describe what I am planning to do with the group. First, I invite people to organize themselves into a curved line graduated from longest serving staffer to the most recent. They range in length of service from nearly 40 years to weeks. At about the 15-year mark the number of women increases in proportion to the men. Above 15 years service, all are men bar one senior administrative role. I invite people to briefly announce their name, their length of service and the area in which they are currently specializing. I do this in order to inform the group, in a precise, ordered, and yet creative fashion, about the others in the group. This is a short-term group, yet it faces all the dilemmas of any group such as: who are these other people? What are they doing here? What do they know? Who else knows someone here? What are the subgroups operating here? These are the types of thoughts running through minds and by addressing

these initially, it reduces anxiety. I usually begin by taking the responses from the longest serving scientist and moving down the line. He starts:

“I began back in the dark ages in 1969 as a trainee botanist working with Plant Studies. I was one of five who started that day. We kicked off at 8:45 that morning, as I recall!”

There is an element of playfulness in the group and I appreciate liveliness in a group when I am likely to create situations of challenge. It can indicate the emergence of spontaneity in a group. Spontaneity, in sociodramatic terms, is the ability to operate in an authentic manner with oneself and with each other in the here and now situation (Browne, 2005).

The first part of the session has taken a little under 30 minutes. I give myself the next 60 or so minutes to develop a set of workable criteria for creating a dramatic enactment. I invite the group of 45 participants to form sub-groups of 4–8 people with differing views on the subject matter of climate change. I then ask them to discuss together their areas of interest and concern with regards to climate change. The sounds of discussion fill the room. The level of noise and the easy discussions I am hearing indicate that the participants are warming up to the task.

Developing group criterion

After 10 minutes, I invite the group members to pay attention to me but also to remain with their discussion sub-group. I approach one group that has been boisterously enjoying themselves and ask; “*Could you let me know one of the main areas of interest or concern you have been discussing on climate change?*” One member of the group presents “*Well, we have a number of areas but the main one is—do we know enough information to make a decision or response regarding climate change?*”

I start with this sub-group because they are the least likely to mind being interrupted. They have a playful and loud energy about them as a group that is likely to make it easy to transition from their small group to the whole group. If I am right, this will also model similar behavior for other groups later in the session.

My job is to now turn this sub-group’s worry about *having enough information on the subject* into a criterion whereby the whole group can discuss. As a sociodramatist, I am aware that we are working with sub-groups, a large group, various cultures, as well as individual concerns regarding climate change. Thus it is best to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of the current group utilizing sociometry, a method that charts the psycho-geography of the group. Spectrograms are processes where easily dichotomised criteria can be set out as a measure in space in a room environment (e.g., how they feel about an issue in the group by placing themselves on an invisible line in the room). For example, having people measure whether they see themselves as *emotional or logical* in the group setting, and placing their person on an imaginary line developed by the facilitator (Kole, 1967). These processes unearth the relationship structures, the core substance of sociometry (Moreno, 1943). My goal is to take this information and turn an area of

interest or concern into a meaningful group related criterion. This is “the fun bit” and I know I will be provided with instant feedback about whether or not I “got it” from the way the whole group responds.

Making the group process dramatic and interactive

This next step utilizes the idea of a large group spectrogram allowing group member to view a snapshot of how a whole group feels about a particular area of concern or interest. In this case I say to the whole group:

“Could you all please imagine a line running through the center of the room? At this end of the line is where you would stand if there is *enough information on climate change.*”

I stand at one end of the imaginary line. I then begin to walk along the imaginary line, taking form beneath me, while at different points saying;

“You would stand here if there was a *reasonable amount of information*, stand here if there was *some information but not enough*, stand here if you thought there was *not nearly enough information*, stand here if you thought there was *hardly any information* at all and lastly, here *if none was your response*. Could you please go and stand where you are in response to the question ‘Do we know enough information about climate change?’”

In using language this way, I have tried to stay as true to both the word usage and intent of the group putting forward this area of interest. Members of the whole group quickly take positions, become active in the group process, chat with folks close to them, and notice where others place themselves.

Some group members represent extremes, however most are scattered along the line. This is good feedback in that participants have not followed one another, as a more anxious group might, but have made their own decisions rather than from “what others decide.”

I invite one person from the “*enough information*” end to inform one person from the other end of the spectrogram as to why they have placed themselves where they have. This process has a number of values: it brings the group together; it lets people see how others have interpreted the question; and it makes the process relational and interactive. I ask each person representing the extremes to explain why they positioned themselves: The person who thinks there is *enough information* says:

“Well it is obvious to me that there is plenty of information around about climate change and unless a person has had their head under a rock they couldn’t miss it.”

To which the person at the other end says:

“Well there may be plenty of information but what is the value of that information? I don’t believe that the information is relevant or accurate. Rather it is opinion, policy and belief. Therefore we definitely don’t have enough information and climate change.”

As each person speaks, the group listens and is affected by individual comments. This is easily observed by the body language, the indrawing of breath, eye contact, along with muttered comments, for example: “Yes!” and “Hmmm!” to both presentations.

Another person in the group says out loud:

“Well that shows there is too much information to make a meaningful decision.”

I interrupt and suggest this could be the next criterion and encourage completion of this task/topic first, to which the person agrees. I ask people to get together with individuals from opposite ends of the line and to chat together about why they placed themselves where they did.

They discuss their reasons with one another for about 10 minutes. This process allows people to present themselves, their thinking and decision making around where they placed themselves on the spectrogram. I invite any further comments from the whole group and three people put forward further interpretations on the *enough information* arena. The group is beginning to operate in a manner that allows new non-stereotypical responses to come forward. From a sociodramatic perspective this means people are operating more from themselves, are moving more freely and in a relaxed manner, for the group to operate in the *here and now* is increasing, and as a group, we are deepening our relationships (Browne, 2005).

I invite the participants to rejoin their original small groups and to continue to discuss their ideas and concerns regarding climate change and to incorporate any additional reflections from the whole group. Then once again, after 15 minutes of interaction, I ask another sub-group to let the whole group know what emerged as their main area of concern.

One person from a sub-group takes the leadership and says:

“Well we were discussing how there is so much information but little precious knowledge or certainty.”

This led me to create another continuum, in a similar manner to the first one, but I voiced this concern in the following manner:

“Up this end you believe there is *so much wisdom* that we can safely say we are all doomed, and walking this way here you think *there is enough to act*, here *there is some but not enough*, here there is *not enough and it gets lost in other priorities*, here you *think it is a storm in a tea a cup* and here *you are still considering buying your Hummer with the extra large V12 engine*.

Please physically place yourself on the line in response to the following question: “*Is there enough knowledge or certainty in the area of climate change?*”

And we continue along similar lines described previously. The group hums along. I repeat this process for all the small sub-groups (there are seven), which takes about

70 minutes. It takes patience and group members remain engaged throughout. Each criterion could be a whole-group process in itself. We cover an enormous amount of territory in a time-effective and manageable manner.

Reflection at the end

During part of the reflection time towards the end of the session, quite a number of people spoke to the group about what they had learned and discovered. Of much interest were the comments from the significant scientists in the area of climate change. They said they were shocked, startled and sobered by discovering that there were so many different viewpoints on climate change when they had thought it was all very straightforward. They said it would impact on how they did their work in the future. They expressed, in different ways, how easy it had been to find this out and some of them wondered if others had been trying to tell them some of what they had just learned and they had been unable to hear it. Others in the group brought forward how surprised they were on noticing how different interpretations of the same word could come about. They thought that this was a significant factor in the debate on climate change.

In Summary

Finding ways to raise the spontaneity of a group is crucial for any group work. This is one way that I have found that works easily with short-term groups focusing on important areas of concern and interest. It suits community meetings, planning and strategic planning meetings.

- a. The principle: Do things to orient the group members to the present and the area of concern as it has been advertised or presented to them.
- b. Judiciously use sociometric criteria to let the group members know enough about one another.
- c. Get small groups to form, making sure difference is one criteria at least enunciated during the formation process.
- d. Invite the group to all discuss their areas of concern and the issues that they are aware of with one another giving enough time.
- e. Invite each small-group to let the larger-group know about one area of concern.
- f. Develop that into a relevant spectrogram for the whole group.
- g. Encourage discussion across the group for all to hear and in small groups or 1:1 amongst the group.
- h. Get back into small group and discuss their responses together and also their own concerns and issues.
- i. Repeat until all small groups have been heard or issues start repeating themselves or as time permits.
- j. Conclude with large group reflection or build that into the next task.

References

Aguiar, M. (2001). Sociodrama in Brazil. *British Journal of Psychodrama and Sociodrama*, 16(1).

- Browne, R. (2005). *Towards a framework for sociodrama*. Thesis for Board of Examiners of the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association
- Kellermann, P. F. (1998). Sociodrama. *Group Analysis*, 31, 179–195.
- Kole, D. M. (1967). The spectrogram in psychodrama. *Group Psychotherapy*, XX(1–2).
- Moreno, J. L. (1937). Sociometry in relation to other social sciences. *Sociometry*, 1(1/2), 206–219.
- Moreno, J. L. (1943). The concept of sociodrama: A new approach to the problem of inter-cultural relations. *Sociometry*, 6, 434–449.
- Moreno, J. L. (1953/1993). *Who shall survive? Foundations of sociometry, group psychotherapy and sociodrama* (Student Edition). McLean, VA: American Society of Group Psychotherapy & Psychodrama.
- Moreno, J. L. (1977). *Psychodrama* (Vol. I, 4th ed.). Beacon, NY: Beacon House.
- Moreno Z. T., Blomkvist, L. D., & Rutzel, T. (2000). *Psychodrama, surplus reality and the art of healing*, Routledge: London
- Sternberg, P., & Garcia, A. (1989). *Sociodrama: Who's in your shoes?* New York: Praeger.
- Wiener, R. (1997). *Creative training: Sociodrama and team building*. Bristol, PA: Jessica Kingsley