

THE USE OF NETWORK CONCEPTS IN AN EDUCATIONAL MODEL

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As clinicians expand the context within which they view clients from the individual to the group and family to the social network, forms for working in the wider context need to be developed. Certainly, meeting with the whole network is as different from talking about the network as meeting with the whole family is from talking about the family—both in terms of assessment and treatment options. Large scale network interventions require large expenditures of resources, however, and are often not practical.

This article illustrates one way in which the concept of social networks may be taught in a workshop or group setting to help people make both behavioral and intrapsychic changes. Using the context of the social network, clients increase their awareness of personal issues and their options for resolving them.

Network interventions on behalf of schizophrenics, depressives, and nuclear families experiencing a breakdown in their relationships historically occurred by gathering a large portion of the social network (Speck and Attneave, 1973; Rueveni, 1975; Cresswell, 1976; Attneave, 1969). When appropriate, such interventions offer some clear advantages: a clearer understanding of the problem within the wider context of relationships, multiple intervention points, the opportunity to include personnel from other agencies, creative and open problem solving, revitalization of social relationships, validation for the network and its members, and the probability that benefits will be experienced by more than the identified patient (Speck and Attneave, 1973; Erickson, 1977). Clark's studies have also suggested that the patient's use of therapeutic community as a part of her/his network is correlated with patient improvement (1967, 1968).

Others have used the examination of the network and a discussion of its possibilities with client or family members to renew and reactivate ties or to plan major life changes, such as a move upon retirement (Fine, 1975; Attneave, 1977). The authors decided to make use of the network concept in an educational model with a range of participants from neurotic to well.

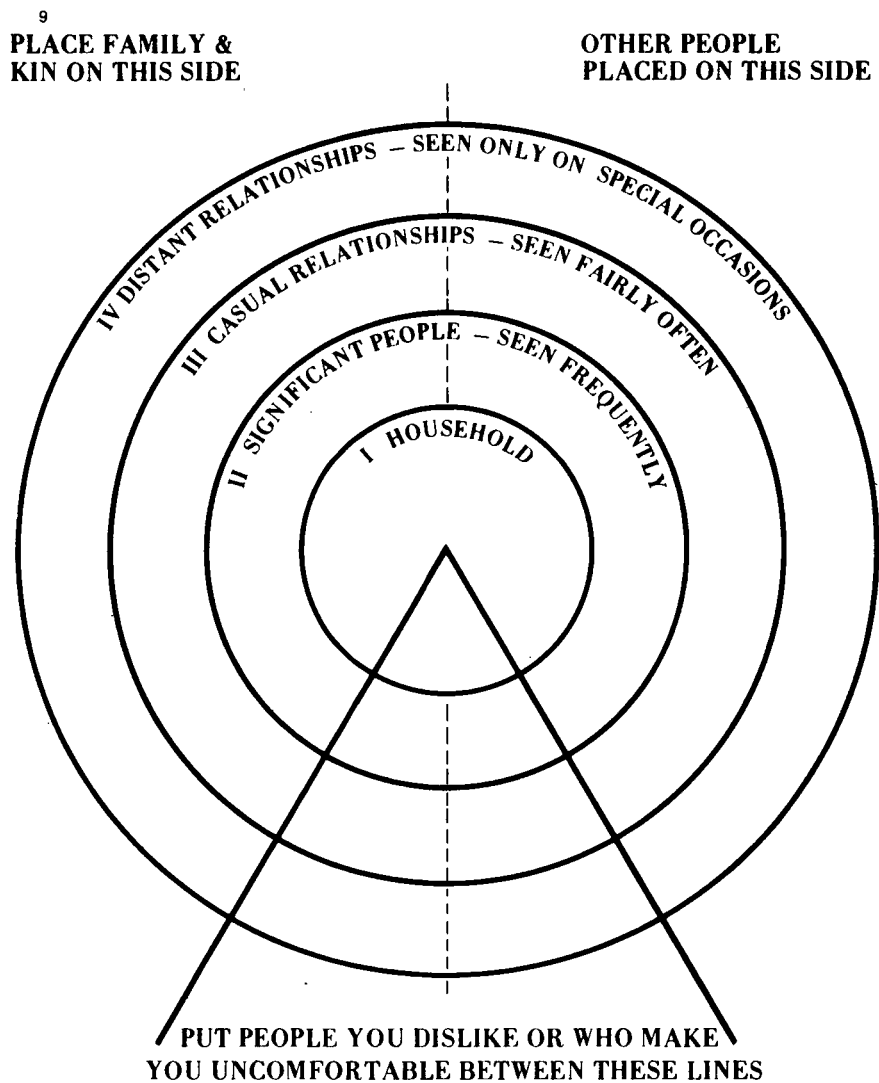
The purpose was to discover if the opportunity to assess one's own network and talk about strategies for change would result in a change in self-reported behaviors with one's network. A workshop was designed, and anecdotal information was collected.

Format

Three sessions, each of three hours duration, comprised each series of workshops. There was a space of one week between the first and second workshops and a space of four or three weeks between the second and third. The time lapse between the last two sessions is greater so that participants have enough time to experiment with new behaviors in regard to their networks. The span was reduced from four to three weeks after feedback from the first group of participants indicated that four weeks also reduced the sense of group cohesiveness that established safety for individuals to share their experiences.

During the first groups, the leaders presented a general description of network theory and practice. Participants were then asked to map their own networks, using a technique and form developed by Attneave (1975). Briefly, participants were asked to list members of their network by the following categories: Household, Close, Casual, and Distant. Participants were assured that no meaning would be attached to the order in which they listed people and that this particular network would be a time/space representation for now and might be different at another time. They were then instructed to put symbols next to each name (squares for men and boys, circles for women and girls, and triangles for pets) and to number the symbols. Most individuals have networks so large that it would be difficult for them to write out each person's name. Symbols are used because they fit on the map more easily. Participants then place the symbols on the appropriate section of the map (Figure 1) and draw lines to connect those people who have contact with each other. After completing their maps, participants were divided into two small groups and invited to share their maps and their feelings as they were drawing them.

The second session began with listing participants' answers when asked what they wanted from their relationships. Although the lists were long and varied, they can be summarized by Weiss' list of relationship aspects that must be present in one's personal network: attachment, social integration, opportunity to nurture, validation, dependable allies, and guidance (1974). The leaders emphasized that individuals may differ in their needs and wants and that the rank order of those needs and wants may change for a given individual over time. Variations in adult development,



family life cycle, life style (including occupation, recreation, personality, and economics), and cyclical change in the need for contact might all be reflected in one's current network. Participants were then divided into small groups to discuss the following questions:

What do you want from your relationships with others that you are not currently finding in your network?

How do you recognize what you need?

Are you getting enough of what you need?

Are you getting too much of anything?

Given where you are headed in the next one or two years, do you have the kinds of people in your network to help you get there? What do you need from people to support your direction? (Permission was also given to be content with one's current network.)

The group was reconvened as a whole and individuals were asked to share any changes they planned to make in their networks and what strategies they might use in the next few weeks to begin those changes.

The third session provided participants with an opportunity to share their own experiences in thinking about and initiating changes in their networks and to learn from the success or problems of other participants' strategies. Participants discussed their thoughts and feelings as they initiated changes in their networks and received validation from the group leaders and each other. Participants again discussed the variations within satisfactory networks and examined the applicability of their new tools for assessment and change to future life developments. The session ended with an evaluation of the workshop by the participants.

Assessment experiences

The simple act of mapping their network appeared to provide important insights for some of the participants. The leaders specifically refrained from suggesting that there was a "right" way to complete the map, and some individuals creatively noted relationship problems by their use of the map. One woman placed her ex-spouse's family (her children's relatives) on the line between kin and non-kin, which also represented their function within her network. She could not quite depend on them for the emotional support and instrumental aid she received from her own relatives, but she could not remove them from her network in the way that she might choose to do with a friend, neighbor, or business associate.

One participant avoided putting any of the symbols inside the close zone. Instead, she placed them on the line between close and casual, which reflected her own sense of keeping people outside of her household at arm's length. Another woman drew two plants inside the household zone. She identified them as two plants in her house that had a particular importance to her. She reported feeling nurtured by them rather than their

meaning being derived by her nurturance of the plants. This particular woman's parents died when she was a young child and the relative who then raised her died when the woman was an adolescent. The plants, it turned out, served as the embodiment of the memory of early nurturing.

For some participants, the number of network members that fit in each zone had importance. A man who reported feeling isolated and alone was surprised to note how many close friends he actually had. He used that information to begin changing how he thought about himself. A woman in her thirties recognized how much of her network was concentrated on the kin side of the map, which helped her understand how she felt both secure and somewhat restricted by a network with so many shared values, experiences, and relationships.

The connecting lines also helped participants identify issues for themselves. A woman who contemplated divorce noticed that most of her closest friends were connected to her husband. After some thought, she recognized that he had brought them into the couple's network and continued to have the primary bond with many of them. She realized that leaving the marriage might actually mean leaving her support network. She decided to develop some friends independent of her husband and to then decide if that would provide enough separation in her life or if she indeed wanted a divorce. A man realized that his network consisted of a number of connected groups of people, many of them professionally related. Of course, leaving any one of the groups meant leaving most of an entire group of friends and associates. The problem of which he was more keenly aware was how difficult he found it to have intimate one-on-one relationships when so much of his time was spent in groups.

Perhaps one of the most useful discoveries participants made was that a wide variety of support was available in their networks. Each member of the network might not be supportive of every part of one's life, but support for nearly any current or new behavior was available somewhere within the network. Several participants noted that their awareness of that phenomenon suggested that they might make major changes in their lives without feeling compelled to disrupt former relationships. They could instead continue to get what support was available for other areas of their lives even if network members disapproved of the more recent changes.

Strategies for change

Participants reported a variety of changes begun as a result of the workshop. Probably the most dramatic was the initiation of new relationships among several men and women who had previously identified themselves as too insecure to meet new people. Since some of the workshop

participants were in counselling with one of the leaders, it was known that these individuals had indeed resisted making new contacts over a period of time. The therapeutic interventions which had been used had not met with success, yet these very individuals came to the third network session boasting of their new acquaintances! When they were asked to explain their hypotheses for the reversal, they each had variations on the same theme. They mentioned that the maps they had constructed the first session were instrumental in changing their mental picture of the world. They could see that they were not isolated and alone, searching for someone to befriend them. Instead they began to view themselves as already surrounded by others, as connected to people. (Some even said to the world or to the universe.) From this frame of reference, it became much easier to initiate new contacts because they felt less alone and more likeable. They maintained that a new contact was not a devastating risk when they were aware of the other people they had to rely on.

For those participants who identified a particular kind of person after which they sought, a number of strategies were successfully employed. Individuals spent time on their own and with others to brainstorm the kinds of places one might be most likely to discover nurturing men or especially bright women. Other participants asked their network for help in locating the kind of person desired. Some took the direct approach of calling someone they had heard of and wanted to meet, most often a business connection or mentor, although not always.

Among the participants who wanted more people inside their close zone, the general agreement was that potential members were already known to the individual and could be found in the casual zone. In order to move closer to the person, what was needed was to spend more time together and to begin the pendulum of reciprocity by either doing something for the other or allowing the other to do something for the individual. Participants recognized that they could make use of their natural style to begin the relationship and then merely needed to maintain the reciprocity. They also saw that a number of their single-stranded relationships (those based on only one shared interest) could easily be expanded to be multi-stranded. Multi-stranded relationships are less vulnerable to loss through natural life changes and provide more richness and closeness within the relationship.

The other noteworthy category of changes was the ways in which participants dealt with network members who appeared in the uncomfortable zone. One mother of an adolescent daughter realized that the girl moves in and out of the uncomfortable zone on her mother's map. She decided that by simply knowing this she could at least stay aware that her relationship with her daughter was not always difficult, although she

might feel that way during those periods. A professional identified one of her colleagues in the close uncomfortable zone as the man who had been her original mentor but now seemed unsupportive of her success. Her strategy was to make her contacts with the man more casual and to stop seeking his approval. Once she had done that, she believed her relationship with him would be more comfortable for her. Another participant in a similar situation simply continued moving the network member out into more distant zones until eventually the member disappeared from his network. Another woman placed her mother in the close uncomfortable zone. Unwilling to take such a severe step as stopping contact, she decided that she needed to find ways to make her relationship with her mother more comfortable. After some thinking, she discovered that the one thing that she and her mother did and enjoyed together was to go shopping. She made a point of structuring as much of the time she spent with her mother in that activity. Over a period of some months she reported that her relationship with her mother had indeed changed. Hypothesizing that sharing an enjoyable activity took care of some of her mother's emotional needs in the relationship, she reported that her mother had become more supportive of both her lifestyle and her career choices, both of which were outside the mother's role expectations.

A variation on that same theme may be found in a woman who reported that she was uncomfortable with her in-laws because the basis of her relationship with them seemed to revolve around talk about her husband. When she was with them, she felt as if she had no particular importance as a human being. After some consideration of the problem, she admitted that their shared interest in her husband was nearly the only thing she had in common with in-laws who had a lifestyle very different from her own. She decided that with that insight she would redefine the discussions of her husband as her in-laws attempts to make contact with her instead of a device to avoid recognizing her existence.

Summary

The educational format of this workshop provided individuals with an opportunity to assess their own networks and to identify both desired changes and plans for implementation. The same technique has been used with clients in a counseling setting to help them plan network changes to support their intrapsychic changes. The approach has also been used in one and two-day workshops, although the participants do not have an opportunity to share their experiences with making changes in such a format.

The effectiveness of the workshop appeared to be the result of a cognitive structure within which participants could think about their relationship picture as a whole. Providing both language and a conceptual framework to discuss their networks allowed participants to organize their previous experiences and to assess their current situations. Clearly, the subject matter was already familiar to participants. Without knowing the language, most people find the concept of networks and their operations quite familiar. The power of the workshop lies in its ability to provide participants with tools to examine and change their own networks. Participants expressed their belief that such tools would continue to be useful to them, and follow-up contact with some of the participants suggested they continued to make use of the material. This use of network theory was, of course, limited by the participant's perception of her/his network. However, it was more practical, less costly, and less cumbersome than a total network gathering. It has been most appropriate as a way of working with networks when a convening of the network was not warranted.

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