

The Alcoholic Family Sociodrama Explores Social Atom Roles

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Sociodrama is an excellent tool for working with substance abuse concerns. This article shows how to help family members who have experienced alcoholism and addiction in the family setting explore social atom roles. Clinicians and educators are well aware that psychodramatic enactments sometimes can become so intensely personal as to increase resistance rather than dissolve it. Sociodrama is an invaluable educational tool that allows for greater emotional distance from the subject being explored. It supports the exploration of issues such as family dynamics, for example, in a less direct but still-engaging way, and particularly the traditional roles of the hero, scapegoat, lost child, and mascot.

KEYWORDS: Alcoholic family; alcoholism; addiction; family roles; sociodrama; psychodrama.

The alcoholic family is a topic that offers rich opportunities to demonstrate and use experiential methods. The complex dynamics within the alcoholic family system, such as denial and isolation, can be concretized through sociodrama so that family members can get a "picture" of what they may have been living with beneath the level of their awareness.

This sociodrama focuses on the social atom experience, and has been adapted in this paper to create a dramatic interpretation of the roles that emerge in an alcoholic—or otherwise addicted or chaotic—family system. Clinicians and educators are well aware that sometimes the psychodramatic enactments can become so intensely personal as to increase resistance rather than dissolve it. Sociodrama (Garcia & Sternberg, 2000) is an invaluable educational tool that allows for greater emotional distance from the subject being explored. It supports the exploration of issues such as family dynamics, for example, in a less direct but still engaging way.

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AN EXAMPLE OF HOW SOCIODRAMA IS USED IN TREATMENT CENTERS AND OTHER SETTINGS

A basic sociodrama that concretizes the alcoholic family system has been used for many years at the Center for Self-Development at the Caron Treatment Centers, an internationally recognized chemical dependency treatment facility in Wernersville, Pennsylvania. It is employed as an educational demonstration regarding the dynamics of the alcoholic family, and as a warmup for an intensive week of treatment with psychodramatic vignettes for adults who have experienced life in an alcoholic family, either in their own childhood or in their present-day relationships.

AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

The sociodrama also adapts well to discussion and education. Variations of the sociodrama have been used in educational settings that include both alcoholics and addicts in the treatment of family members affected by addiction. I have continued to use, modify, and reinvent this sociodramatic exploration through the years in many settings, including adult chemical dependency treatment, adolescent chemical dependency treatment, college lectures, community programs, women's shelter psychoeducational groups, and parenting and relationship classes and presentations.

ROLES IN THE ALCOHOLIC FAMILY SYSTEM

The basic information about the roles in an alcoholic family system comes from the classic *Another Chance: Hope and Health for the Alcoholic Family* (1990) by Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse, a protégée of Virginia Satir, and a pioneer in the adult children of alcoholics movement, which took root in the United States in the mid-1980s. Wegscheider-Cruse's book identified five roles that evolve as individuals adapt to the presence of an alcoholic or addict in their home: they are the *enabler*, *hero*, *scapegoat*, *lost child*, and *mascot*. Each of these roles is identified as a collection of maladaptive behaviors and defenses that help family members to survive living in an alcoholic family system. The hero, for example, is the highly achieving child who is the family's ambassador to the outside world. The scapegoat is the child who exhibits the underlying anger of the family and tends to act out, often with a chemical or compulsion to dull the pain of living in a confusing or chaotic system. The lost child, sometimes called the invisible child, is one who survives by staying quiet, isolated, and invisible in the family, and is often the isolate in other groups in sociometric terms. The mascot, sometimes called the clown, is the child who uses an excessive amount of humor and playfulness to diffuse and deny painful feelings within the self and within the family system.

In addition to these roles, the sociodrama also has the opportunity to provide a space to safely recognize and discuss the emotional trauma (Dayton, 2000) that inevitably arises within the members of the family group as the addiction progresses.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE SOCIODRAMA OF AN ADDICTED FAMILY SYSTEM

In the following sociodrama, we begin with a group of individuals who are gathered in a setting where there is enough open space for the action to take place. There is the introduction of the director, and a general description of experiential methods that will accompany the lecture format. The program is described as interactive. Rather than being told the words "sociodrama" or "psychodrama," group members are told that they will be invited to participate at the level at which they are comfortable, and that one of the participatory levels can simply be watching and listening while others take roles in this interactive demonstration.

A few simple props are placed within easy reach, none of which will break or hurt others if impulsively thrown or accidentally dropped. These may include a paper or plastic foam cup, a few stuffed animals, scarves or lengths of fabric, a fake or real pack of cigarettes, a paper plate and plastic spoon, a small plastic bag of fake pills, and a few pillows. At least one or two extra chairs are also available. Not all props will be used, but they are easily available if needed.

Warmup

We begin with some sociometric exercises to allow the group to get acquainted. Depending on the time available and the director's sense of participants' level of comfort in the group, we may pick one of several options or use more than one option.

Group Clusters

One option is to ask the group members to cluster in dyads or triads to discuss a simple question. The question may be: "Share one thing you know that happens when a person is living with an active alcoholic or addict," or "What one thing would you like to know more about that happens in families where someone is addicted?"

Circles

We may also employ circle sociometry, starting by requesting that the group members rise to stand in a circle. Participants are invited to "step in" the circle if they personally relate to any category that is mentioned, wait a few moments, and then step out of the circle.

The facilitator begins with simple, often seemingly innocuous elicitations that are non-threatening and allow for general disclosure:

"Step in if you are the oldest child in the family."

"Step in if you've had a pet at any time in your life."

"Step in if you are the middle child of the family."

"Step in if you consider yourself a creative person."

"Step in if you are the youngest child in a family."

"Step in if you sometimes overeat."

"Step in if you have or ever had a best friend."

"Step in if your pet was the only being that seemed to understand you in your family."

"Step in if you are a parent."

"Step in if you felt loved by someone in your family."

"Step in if you are a grandparent."

As the group warms up and becomes more trusting, elicitation may be designed to allow for more disclosure:

"Step in if you've ever felt angry about living with a person who was alcoholic."

"Step in if you have ever taken a drink of alcohol."

"Step in if you are in recovery in a 12-step program."

"Step in if you've ever felt emotionally neglected when living with an alcoholic."

"Step in if you have ever felt that alcohol or drugs have affected your life in a negative way."

"Step in if you have ever used a drug."

"Step in if you lived in a family that looked 'good' on the outside but was hurting inside."

"Step in if you felt lonely as a child."

"Step in if your mother was the alcoholic in the family."

"Step in if you ever wished you lived another family."

"Step in if your father was the alcoholic in the family."

Participants step in and are able to pause for a moment to recognize their sociometric connections with others who share the same experience.

If time and willingness permit, participants may share some of the information relating to why they have stepped in. This often stimulates conversation, and the director gives permission to others in the group to announce their own criteria, which both increases disclosure and builds group connections further.

At some point the director will say, "Step in if you're willing to portray the generic alcoholic for our group here today. It doesn't matter if you are actually an alcoholic or not, just that you are willing to play that role right now." Invariably, at least one person will step forward. The director will give that person a paper cup (or another prop signifying the addiction) to hold as he or she takes the role.

As the remainder of the group members return to their seats, the director keeps the verbal involvement alive by asking the group first simply to identify our

generic alcoholic or addict: "What is his or her name?"; "Where does he or she live?"; "What kind of work does the person do?"; "What drug or chemical is involved?"

When the identity is in place, the group is then asked to identify common behaviors of the actively addicted person. Words come out easily from the now-warm group: "angry," "blaming," "manipulative," "dependent," "evasive," "denying," "forgetful." The list goes on.

The Sociodrama

As we identify the details of the life of this sociodramatic player, the person portraying the alcoholic is given verbal permission to experiment with taking a stance with a prop, whether it be the cup, the bag of pills, or some other item. As the warming up continues, the alcoholic is given the opportunity to create a soliloquy, which may be amplified or embellished by the doubling of the director.

The person portraying the alcoholic is given a partner, also a volunteer, to portray the enabler. The group again helps to identify the partner's "name," the length and type of the characters' relationship, and other details. The facilitator may help with details, ask the group to help with details, or point out specific behaviors of the enabler, such as hiding alcohol, watching the amount of alcohol being used, covering for the alcoholic's social and work lapses, caretaking, and denying the problem.

The facilitator then introduces each of the roles, starting with the hero, the high achiever. Information and conversation ensues as the hero roams around the stage to take his or her spot and improvise a suitable posture. Then the scapegoat takes his or her place, accompanied by additional information and discussion about this role and how it develops within the family system. We then add the lost child, with more discussion, and finally the mascot.

Props may be provided to identify the roles more clearly and to encourage a bit of dramatization. For instance, the lost child may receive a stuffed animal to "play" with, or a coloring book and ink marker; the scapegoat may receive the plastic bag of pills; the mascot a funny hat, sponge ball, or length of colorful fabric. Pillows may be held in front of the face to represent emotional walls that are constructed to cope with the pain in the family.

Between each introduction, the persons playing each of the roles are given an opportunity to interact and improvise with the other members of the "family" in their roles. They may also be given an opportunity to offer a soliloquy or small "aside" to say what they are really thinking or feeling underneath the maladaptive role. Group members may also be called to double members of this social atom as well.

Because the director is familiar with the alcoholic family roles, he or she will be able to put these behaviors into the context of issues that relate to abuse, trauma, defense coping mechanisms that carry into adulthood, parenting deficits, and more. Depending on the population, discussion may be pursued about the recovery priorities of each role, the changes that can be made by each role to create more healthy parenting behaviors, and the need to replace isolation with positive social support.

Adding Future Scenes

The director may choose to fast-forward the time in this family at some point during the drama in order to illustrate how dynamics learned in childhood can get passed down to the next generation. For example, the hero child may "grow up" to marry and become a parent. We might identify children in the new generation as having an eating disorder (giving them the paper plate and plastic spoon as a prop), or as experiencing issues of perfectionism, attention deficit, and the like.

Another future projection option shows what the family will look and act like after recovery. Props or postures may be used to concretize the projection more completely. The hero, for instance, may demonstrate less perfectionism and caretaking, along with more self-care; the scapegoat may demonstrate how to present anger more appropriately; the lost child may demonstrate how to reach out and make positive connections with others, and the mascot may demonstrate his or her ability to express a range of feelings, both happy and sad.

Creating Sociometric Connections within the Group

As the drama concludes, the director may ask the observing group members to rise to walk and stand with the character to whom they most relate, creating sociometric connections in action. They may be allowed to share in clusters with the person they chose about how they relate to the role they represented in the drama.

The director also may request public sharing from both the sociodramatic auxiliaries and the observers. The auxiliaries may share how it felt to play the role; the observers or group members may share how they related to what they saw. If time permits, they may also share new information relating to what they learned during the sociodrama about alcoholic families.

Journaling after the session can also be a helpful adjunct, allowing group members to process their experience more deeply. Group members may have the assignment of general "free writing" about whatever comes to mind, or they may be given specific assignments. These might include answering such questions as: "What role or roles did you most identify with when watching this drama?"; "What feelings emerged as you watched?"; "Are you still behaving according the role learned in your original family, or how do you see yourself changing?"; Indeed, the possibilities for journal assignments are many.

CONCLUSION

This sociodrama with the alcoholic/addicted family atom is quite versatile. It can be used as an educational tool or a therapeutic exploration in numerous settings and with various populations. It can stand alone as a one-time presentation, and it can serve as an excellent warmup to psychodramatic group work at the beginning of an intensive week or weekend. It can be used as part of a series of group meetings. Even resistant individuals may become engaged in the process as they recognize patterns from their own families or families they know. The director should be prepared for questions from the group about facts about addictive and

enabling behaviors, as well as family recovery issues. Handouts could be made available that offer further information and resources.

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