

Drawing the Personal Perceptual Socio-Cultural Atom

An Exercise in Sharpening and Stretching Tele Function

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The author has provided a description of drawing a personal social atom from the perspective of the subjectively perceived sociogram. A clear approach on how to develop a personal social atom are given along with instructions on how to use lines and colors to indicate preference, neutrality or rejection between and among those represented on the atom, including the self/protagonist. The author notes that the clinicians using this approach are also free to further adapt it for their own particular populations, needs and uses. A series of questions on which to reflect, not found elsewhere, have been offered to expand the exploration of one's perceptual social-cultural atom, and enrich self-discovery. Regular attention is encouraged to investigate significant changes, areas of neglect, and promising developments.

KEYWORDS: social atom; cultural atom; sociogram; sociometry; interpersonal perception; tele; social atom exploration.

The “social atom” refers to the smallest unit of interpersonal relations that a person has around him or herself. “Sociogram” is an objective pictorial record of such relationships. The term is usually applied in groups, small and large, based on a particular criterion or choice. The term “perceptual” refers to a personal, subjectively perceived sociogram, your own emotional geography, in which you are the central person or protagonist. It is drawn on paper or computer, registering your own relationship to all significant others in three areas—personal, professional/work, and social—based on one's subjective perception of your social world, known as a social or cultural atom.

Questions to consider before drawing this chart are general ones: What are my feelings toward, for instance, my intimate other, my parents, my friends, my co-workers, my social companions, and so forth? Further, what are their feelings toward me, as well as toward one another? We really know more about these invisible strands than we give ourselves credit.

Make different drawings for each of the three categories. Do not mix the personal, social, and work categories, even if some overlap. Any overlap can be shown on a separate page.

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DRAWING THE SOCIAL-CULTURAL ATOMS AND NOTATION

To make a drawing of such a sociogram, identify yourself with a circle if female, and a triangle if male. Place yourself in the center of the page, with an initial or the first two letters of your own name inside the identifying symbol. Next, place all the significant others around you at some distance, either close to you or distant, according to your perception. Identify each person by an initial or two letters inside a circle or triangle. Be sure to include as many persons as you can.

To enable you to recall who is who, make a note at the lower left of the page to record whose names are represented. This is also recommended for noting what each line means. For example, if you use a color for a positive relation line, record that same color by drawing a short line down on the bottom left of the page, noting what the line means. For instance, red might be used for attraction, green for rejection, blue for neutral, or whatever you choose. If using black ink, indicate those by a simple line for attraction, a heavier line for rejection, a dotted line for neutral, and a parallel for ambivalence in two colors or two different lines—or whatever you prefer for all your lines. Obviously, you are free to invent your own lines. These are only suggestions.

Remember to keep a note at the bottom of the page as to what each category and each line represents. Be sure to focus on how you perceive each person in relationship to yourself as the center, drawing the lines of connection from your side and from the others toward yourself, whether positive, ambivalent, negative, or neutral. For a one-way choice from you or to you (a completely unreciprocated relationship), draw the line all the way, either from or to you, with an arrow at the end. This applies to you and to the other.

Decide how to indicate neutrality and ambivalence; for instance, for ambivalence, you could draw a parallel, with one solid line, the other dotted, or each parallel line a different density. For neutrality, you could use . . . from you or to you; a mutually neutral relationship could be all . . . but with a little cross line in the middle. Whatever form you choose, keep your list at the bottom of the page current and consistent, indicating whom the initials represent, as well as what emotions the colors or lines mean.

All lines from you only go halfway to each person, leaving the rest for the way you perceive how others relate to you. Draw a small vertical line across the ending of your own lines. This entire process is an interpersonal tele test, a test of mutuality, not a “guess who” test. The more mutual the choices, as indicated by exactly the same type of line as your line, the better the balance within your sociogram.

All lines coming toward yours are in whatever form seems best for each line, using the same format as for your own choices. If you perceive that your choice is reciprocated, the line from that person is identical with your own and meets yours at the end point of your line toward that person. If a relationship is not mutual, decide what line represents the other’s relation toward you. Choose whatever line you feel is appropriate. All lines should be completed. Figure 1 is provided as a guideline.

See Figures 2 and 3 for examples of a notation system (tele) and social atom from J. L. Moreno (1953).

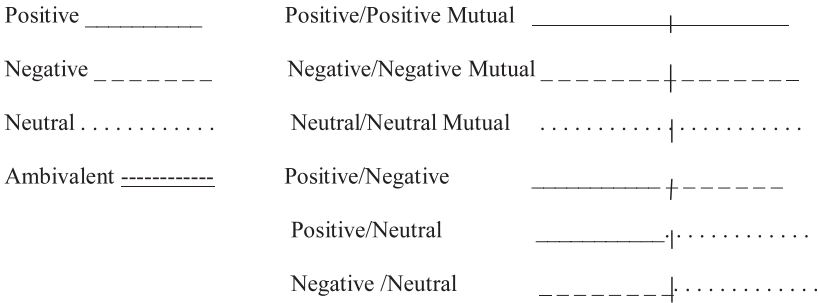


Figure 1. Sample lines for social-cultural atoms.

The Perceptual Aspect

If you have trouble sensing what the others feel toward you, you can role reverse in an empty chair, facing yours. Perception of oneself versus others may be strong, weak, distorted, or negative. Turn a clear light on yourself and others, making sure you rely upon your inner strength and good will toward others as well as toward yourself. Fortunately, our perception is subject to change.

In addition, if known, use your perception to try to establish the relationships between the others to one another; these should also be drawn. For example, think of how their relationships to one another impact on you, such as whether or not your in-laws approve of you and your family of origin, and who among your family and friends reject your choice of most significant other, and so on.

The more mutually positive the relationships are felt to be and shown by the same lines as your own in all three areas, the stronger are the connections and the better balanced your life.

Reflections and Questions to Ask Yourself

Look again at those lines indicating rejection either to or from others and ask yourself: Are these more numerous than the positive ones? Is that a stable pattern of mine? How and where have I learned that? How do I change it? How can I best use my strengths to correct this or that relationship? Or ask yourself: Is this a person I really need in my world? If so, can we turn this negative relationship positive, or do we need to disconnect if that relationship is not mutually productive? Have we been hanging on too long? If so, how do we disconnect without hurting each other? Isn't it better for that other person and me to be freed from negative energy so that positive energy can be used elsewhere, with other people? Are we not both worthy of that? Can I take responsibility for this? How do I handle it?

The most complicated connections are ones in which one person chooses another who either rejects or is indifferent to the chooser. Is that another aspect of your pattern? What if you are the rejecting or neutral one and that person

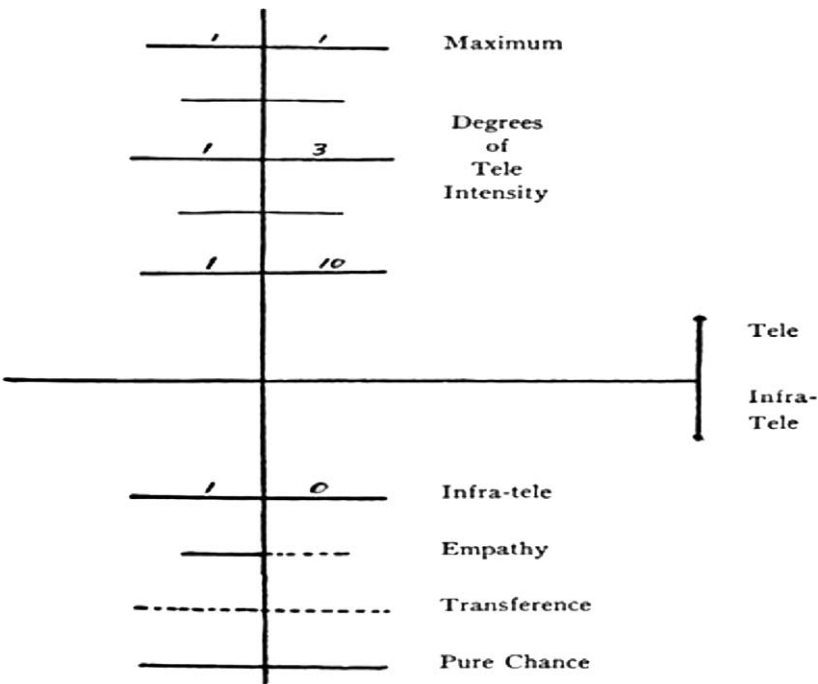


Figure 2. Tele chart II: The vertical spread of tele in a social structure.
This chart shows a scale ranging from maximum tele to pure chance. The area between tele and chance covers a range of incomplete perceptions and pathological interpersonal relations. Adapted from *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Sociometry, Group Psychotherapy, and Sociodrama* by J. L. Moreno, 1953, p. 298.

chose you? All of us have experienced these connections and have had to deal with them. All require the ability to feel ourselves into the other with the heart, to let that heart guide us.

If mutual neutrality or indifference shows up frequently and if that state is satisfactory to you both and does not require attention, so be it. But if this person holds a central position in your life, it requires serious attention and possibly some choices and decisions for the future.

This highlights a vital point in all these relationships: whether we give a person a central or not-so-important place in our life. If that connection is peripheral or not significant—or has been replaced—it may be easier to let go. Whatever choices are made, we can never be sure that we know absolutely how the other feels, but we should be clear about how *we* feel. We also need to consider how to deal with the feelings of the others.

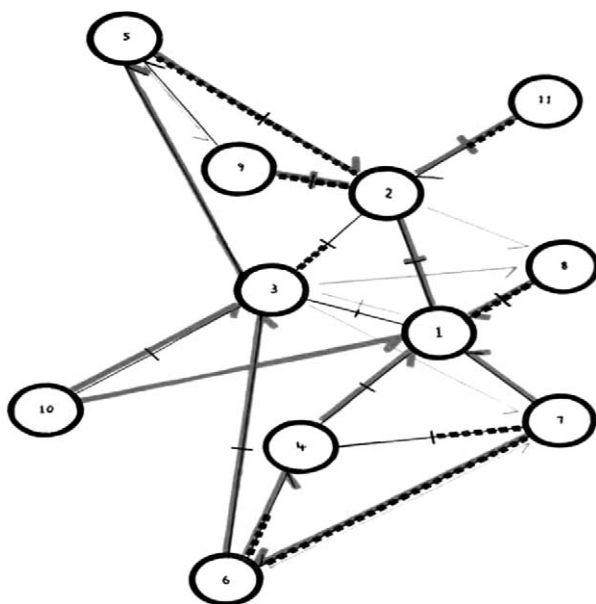


Figure 3. Organization of Social Atom Multi-Criterial Sociogram.

Key to Sociogram: Solid black lines indicate *acquaintance* obtained by the question: Please list the names of all persons with whom you are acquainted at your place of work. Heavy interrupted black lines indicate *choice* (attraction) obtained by the criterion: Which person or persons do you enjoy having as guests in your home. Heavy red lines indicate *choice* (attraction) obtained by the criterion: With which person or persons do you like to work when called upon to do a job requiring cooperative effort?

This chart illustrates that the volume of acquaintances is the matrix out of which attractions and rejections between individuals emerge. It also shows, within the same sociogram, the cumulative effect of three different criteria. Single criterion sociograms give only a fragmentary portrayal of the position of an individual within a social group. The sociometric status of an individual may change from one criterion to another. An individual who is classified as an isolate or a star on one criterion may not be classified as such on another criterion or on the same criterion at a later date. Adapted from *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Sociometry, Group Psychotherapy, and Sociodrama* by J. L. Moreno, 1953, pp. 304–305.

In Summary

If you undertake to work on your socio-cultural atom and draw it again at later stages in life, you may be delighted at the changes and improvements you have achieved. The more often you do this exercise, the sharper your perception will become and the better balanced your socio-emotional world.

Moreno (1978) suggested we take time to do this once a month, just as we check our bank account. Who have I lost? Which relationship needs my attention to repair or end? Which relationship have I neglected? What new connection was offered that needs a follow-up?

- Above everything else, be absolutely clear and honest in this process, or you will not gain anything from it.
- You might want to share your sociogram with someone you trust and to whom you are mutually positively related, to get that person's observations. They could be very instructive.
- If you find you can change, improve, or add anything to this self-evaluation, please inform me. Your finding will be seriously considered and may be added, referring to you, in later versions.
- Consider this a work in progress.

Good luck with this map of exploration of your own social geography.

REFERENCE

Moreno, J.L. (1978). *Who shall survive? Foundations of sociometry, group psychotherapy, and sociodrama*. Beacon, NY: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1934, 1953). Available from <http://asgpp@asgpp.org/docs/WSS/WSS.html>