THE SOCIAL, ROLE AND CULTURAL ATOMS

Moreno’s sociometric research led him to regard human beings not as utterly separate individuals but as social beings whose survival depended on the health of their position in a social and cultural web of relationships. These atoms map the interpersonal world, (Moreno called it “psychological geography”); they reveal the network of relationships that give the person a sense of belonging (their interpersonal matrix). In his book “Who Shall Survive” Moreno warned that the person whose social atom was impoverished or empty might well not survive: we are social creatures and need each other. “Who Shall Survive” is substantially a work about sociometry (the measurement of social relationships). He devised methods for graphically representing a person’s position in their social, role and cultural relationships and showed that these positions could be changed for the better or worse throughout life to promote health or reduce ability to function and even survive. The atoms show our interconnectedness: the more connections the more we are “held” and enriched by our environment; the fewer connections the more vulnerable and in need of support. The graphic diagrams, the “atoms” can be a useful tool in assessment and as a warm-up to psychodrama/sociodrama.

There are three inter-connected atoms: the social atom for looking at relationships, the role atom for looking at the roles people play, the cultural atom for looking at the cultural aspects of the person’s life (which may emerge from their roles or other influences in their development). The diagrammatic tool is three concentric circles with the client’s name at the centre point. The first circle is the intimate zone. The second represents an area of relative proximity and the third zone is for more distant acquaintances/roles/influences which are significant rather than close. The area beyond the third circle can be used for people/roles/influences that are deceased or absent yet are still significant. Graphically the atom diagrams may use circles for females and triangles for males to represent different people and roles, with connecting lines annotated with + or - to represent the positive and negative tele relationships. (Moreno, 1939, 16)

Social Atom
The social atom charts the people we relate to in order of closeness. So one sibling may be in the intimate zone and another a mere distant acquaintance, pushed out. The atom enables us to reflect on whom we would like to draw closer to us and who is moving away. Using coloured pens we can also graphically represent feelings towards and between these people. We may draw our social atom at different times in our lives and see what has changed. Lovers come and go, friends grow closer, parents depart.

Role Atom
Throughout life we are given, take on or play/create roles. These can be divided into three/four areas: somatic roles; family/social roles; psychodramatic roles. Roles can be progressive or dysfunctional (Clayton in Holmes et al., 1994, 136). The role atom diagrams give us the opportunity to reflect on which we want to change, expand, contract. It may represent roles that conflict, providing an opportunity to work on this through psychodrama/sociodrama. The role atom may be compared with the social atom to
discover who our role models were and how intra-psychic (inner) roles relate to inter-
psychic (outer) roles. We may notice significant role clusters and recognise we need to
develop our role repertoire: we can then experiment in psychodrama/sociodrama taking
roles and rehearsing behaviours. The role atom can enable us to analyse our roles: what
roles do we play? We can examine what power each role contains. Are we suffering role
poverty or role overload? Are there roles we need to leave: from which we need to de-
role? Do we have grief for roles lost?
Moreno also referred to the role atom as the cultural atom. “The pattern of role relations
around an individual as their focus is called the cultural atom.”
(Moreno in Fox, 1987, 95)
He saw roles as a unit of culture: (Moreno, 1993, 42) indeed that there is a relationship
between culture and role: this might be illustrated for example by the change in the roles
of women as our culture has changed in the last 100 years.

Cultural Atom:
The cultural atom is composed of the influences (as opposed to the persons in the social
atom) which constellate the individual person’s sense of belonging in the world: the
person’s reference points that give meaning to his/her life. The cultural atom plots the fact
that we are also creatures who need meaning in our lives: a sense of having a meaningful
context, which we can further enrich through the choices we make, nurtures our sense of
identity and spiritual well being. Culture can be a source of nourishment but it may also
be a source of conflict and damage: a critical examination of someone’s cultural heritage
may enable them to choose to change attitudes for more helpful outcomes.
Moreno pointed out that the cultural atom can change radically when a monk enters a
monastery leaving behind his normal social roles (Fox, 1987, 52). This is true for patients
entering hospital, or a civilian entering a major institution such as the army or a
profession. He suggested that the cultural atom of psychotic patients “is of paramount
importance to us, for it is from his cultural atom that we get our picture of his inner
world.” (Fox, 1987, 72; originally from Moreno, 1945, 7)
Whilst changes might occur very rapidly in the cultural atom Moreno hypothesised that
previous roles were replaced by new roles (Fox, 1987,73) so for example our relationship
with our spirituality may be carried by numerous different role relationships or cultural
conserves yet there be continuity, like a theme or through line in music.

These three atoms overlap and inter-relate and can be useful in understanding how action
methods can empower a person to develop their spontaneity and creativity in life.

References:
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