

## Using action methods to counter social isolation and shame among gay men

John Olesen, Jean Campbell & Michael Gross

To cite this article: John Olesen, Jean Campbell & Michael Gross (2017): Using action methods to counter social isolation and shame among gay men, Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2017.1294518>



Published online: 21 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Using action methods to counter social isolation and shame among gay men

John Olesen<sup>a</sup>, Jean Campbell<sup>b</sup>, and Michael Gross <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Living Waters Institute, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA; <sup>b</sup>Action Institute of California, Encinitas, California, USA; <sup>c</sup>Private Practice, Long Beach, California, USA

### ABSTRACT

Despite legal and cultural amelioration of homophobia, shame and internalized homophobia persist with concomitant adverse health and mental health consequences. J. L. Moreno's system of psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy offers approaches that help counter shame and internalized homophobia and increase peer support among diverse groups of gay men. Sociometric tools help create safety, establish group cohesion, build interpersonal connections, and strengthen identification and a sense of universality. The technique of doubling increases empathy. Explorations conducted during brief enactments using psychodramatic techniques heighten appreciation for diversity in the community while promoting self-acceptance and increased self-efficacy. Group sharing guidelines help strengthen mutual identification and mitigate shame and social isolation.

### KEYWORDS

mental health;  
discrimination; homophobia;  
minority stress

### Introduction

Across the age spectrum, two of the most consistent predictors of impaired mental health among lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) populations are social isolation and shame, especially internalized homophobia. Interventions that increase social connections and interpersonal capacity, and that lower shame and increase self-acceptance, improve mental health outcomes. This article, based on extensive experience working with diverse groups of gay men, introduces simple yet highly effective group techniques for building interpersonal connections and for increasing self-acceptance through the curative factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) of universality, socializing techniques, interpersonal learning, and group cohesiveness. These techniques are drawn from the three components of the triadic system of psychodrama created by J. L. Moreno (Garcia & Buchanan, 2000; Moreno, 1946): sociometry, enactment, and sharing, with a particular emphasis here on techniques of applied sociometry.

We begin by reviewing evidence for the elevated prevalence of shame and social isolation among LGB populations and for the adverse health and mental health

outcomes that ensue as the rationale for interventions that increase interpersonal support and self-acceptance. We then describe and illustrate the use of applied sociometric techniques (spectrograms, target sociograms, locograms, step-in sociometry, dyads and triads, and action sociograms) for increasing safety, cohesion, and mutual identification among group members; explain and illustrate the psychodramatic method of doubling to cultivate empathy; and identify guidelines for group sharing that reduce shame by focusing on mutual identification. To illustrate how these elements may be combined, we describe two workshops on the topic of dating among gay men. Finally, we report on the impact of such group experiences in reducing isolation and increasing self-esteem among a convenience sample of gay men who participated in such drop-in groups in San Francisco, California.

### **LGB minority stress, stigma, shame, and isolation**

Over more than a decade, increasing evidence has supported the minority stress model, in which stigma “leads LGB persons to experience alienation, lack of integration with the community, and problems with self acceptance” (Meyer, 2007, p. 249). Various lines of evidence suggest that LGB identity can have sequelae as severe as other traumatic life events. LGB populations suffer disproportionately high rates of exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Andersen & Blonich, 2013; Felitti et al., 1998), including 3 times the rate of childhood sexual abuse and more than twice the rate of physical abuse as their heterosexual counterparts, as well as disproportionately high rates of exposure to multiple ACEs (Austin, Herrick, & Proescholdbell, 2016), which are associated with poor health and mental health outcomes, including twice the rate of depression among heterosexuals. LGB adults exposed during adolescence to environments with high levels of structural stigma (severe, persistent, shaming antigay laws and policies) show biological stress responses equivalent to people with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Hatzenbuehler & McLaughlin, 2014). Likewise, severe exposure to prejudicial events associated with LGB sexual identity (e.g., harassment, employment termination, non-life-threatening physical assault) cause PTSD symptoms equivalent to those associated with exposure to actual or threatened death or serious physical injury (Alessi, Martin, Gyamerah, & Meyer, 2013). Not only are LGB-related verbal and physical threats or assaults associated with PTSD but, when such experiences occur on multiple occasions during adolescence, PTSD symptoms persist into young adulthood even when victimization ceases (Mustanski, Andrews, & Puckett, 2016).

Shame and impaired interpersonal relationships are among characteristic sequelae of PTSD (Badenoch, 2008); techniques to mobilize social support and enhance interpersonal skills are key elements in recovery from PTSD (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008). Shame, expressed as internalized homophobia, manifests as rejection of one’s own sexuality, fear of self-disclosure, and rejection of—hence disconnection from—other gay people (Herek, Chopp, & Strohl, 2007, p. 189). Importantly, historical patterns of cultural and legal acceptance of homosexuality have so far failed to reduce internalized homophobia among younger men but, over the life course, resolution

of internalized homophobia improves health outcomes among gay men (Herrick et al., 2013). Among midlife and older LGBT adults (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Shiu, Goldsen, & Emlert, 2014), social support and a positive sexual identity improve quality of life. Social support becomes increasingly salient as a physical and mental health protective factor with advancing age (Gendron, Pendleton, & White, 2016).

Absent evidence-based treatments to address the sequelae of minority stress, including internalized homophobia, shame, and interpersonal difficulties, key elements recommended for LGB-affirmative therapy focus on addressing stigma and internalized homophobia and facilitating supportive peer relationships (Proujansky & Pachankis, 2014). Based on these principles, the techniques elaborated on in this article are specifically designed to reduce shame, especially internalized homophobia, and to enhance interpersonal competence and access to social support. Based on an extensive body of experience among its coauthors, this article focuses on gay men, although the methods are generalizable to other sexual minority populations.

### **Psychodramatic techniques: An overview**

Applied sociometry comprises a group of techniques that efficiently establish safety and cohesion in groups (Hale, 2006; Marineau, 2007). As the initial phase of a psychodrama session, these techniques lower anxiety and enhance creativity and spontaneity, allowing for the emergence of a focus for the second phase of a typical psychodrama session, the enactment or drama. In the final phase of a psychodrama session, group members share how they identify with the experiences and feelings manifested in the drama, which allows the protagonist (the person whose issue has been explored) to feel the group members “get” him and understand him from the inside out. There is no advice-giving or judging the enactment, as this has the potential to shame the protagonist, especially after he has revealed himself and is highly vulnerable.

Although this triadic system comprises an integrated approach to a psychodrama session, it also provides techniques that can be disaggregated. In this article we focus on (a) techniques from applied sociometry, (b) use of the technique of doubling to cultivate empathy and deepen affect, and (c) guidelines for sharing through empathetic identification rather than by advice-giving or evaluative comments.

These methods offer potent creative approaches for countering shame and reducing social isolation. Applied sociometry deploys action-oriented techniques that facilitate gradual, progressively more intimate self-revelation in a climate of safety. These techniques encourage group members to accept differences within the group while facilitating connections; through positive identification, group members learn that they are not alone.

Doubling and sharing guidelines can be understood in the framework of attachment theory (Campbell, 2014). Developmentally, a capacity for secure attachment depends on adequate doubling and mirroring. Doubling occurs when a primary caregiver is accurately attuned to an infant's needs (e.g., for holding, feeding, being put to bed). By being seen and understood with compassion by a primary caregiver,

he begins to develop an internalized sense of self. The mirror stage helps the child begin to differentiate between self and others. Mirroring can be positive (“What a cute smile you have!”); negative (“Boys don’t wear lipstick”); or neutral (“You have blue eyes”). Adequate mirroring balances affirmative, neutral, and negative (corrective) responses to infant or child behavior; if it is harsh, the sense of self becomes distorted. By doubling before negative mirroring, the caregiver reinforces the child’s underlying sense of safety and love, so he can better hear corrective guidance: for example, “You know that I love you, Jimmy, but you did a bad thing hitting your younger sister.”

Shame arises from inadequate doubling and excessive negative mirroring. Inadequate doubling occurs when a primary caregiver negates an infant’s or child’s feelings (“You don’t really want to play with dolls; you want to play with trucks”) or when a caregiver does not provide sufficient doubling—that is, from neglect or parental avoidance (e.g., when parental discomfort with a child’s non-heteronormative behavior leads to negative affect, disgust, or negative reinforcement). Inadequate doubling impairs development of a sense of self and fosters dependency on others for self-affirmation. With inadequate doubling and excessively harsh, critical, or negative mirroring, the child internalizes a judgmental, self-critical self-appraisal (i.e., shame).

We demonstrate, liberally offer, and instruct group members in doubling because it can begin to offer a corrective experience: that the individual is understood and accepted for who and what he is. Furthermore, during sharing we emphasize identification (in essence, doubling) rather than advice or evaluative comments (mirroring) because advice and appraisals can exacerbate the sense that one is being judged; advice in particular is apt to be experienced as negative mirroring (“I know better than you, and here’s what I think you should do”), which reinforces shame.

### **Applied sociometry**

Sociometry, a tool created by J. L. Moreno (Blatner, 2000; Hale, 1985), is an action exploration of the underlying relational structure of a couple, family, group, etc. The therapist poses questions (or criteria) that individuals answer through action, thus making visible the positive, negative, and neutral connections that often go unspoken but can activate positive affiliations and a sense of mutual identification while also honoring and respecting differences. A general principle is that the progression of issues or topics explored and the sequence of techniques progress gradually from periphery—less personal, less emotionally vulnerable—to core—more intimate, emotional, and deeply self-disclosing. For instance, the first issue explored in a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) group probably would not be about exposure to bullying or abuse but about a more bland topic such as birthplace. Participants’ somatic and verbal responses indicate their level of anxiety at any given point in the process. Titrating the sequence of techniques and issues allows the group facilitator to adjust to the level of comfort of participants, going deeper if they show increasing signs of comfort with self-disclosure or backing away toward less intimate topics if participants begin to show signs of anxiety such as slowness to

make a choice during a sociometric exploration, flattening affect, or hesitant or pressured speech.

From applied sociometry we describe and illustrate the use of specific methods—spectrograms, target sociograms, locograms, step-in sociometry, dyadic and small group sharing, and action sociograms—to build safety and trust, encourage self-disclosure, increase intimacy, deepen mutual identification, lower shame, and create corrective experiences of interpersonal connectedness.

### **Spectrograms**

A sociometric tool the group leader can utilize to explore any attitude or feeling is the spectrogram, an imaginary line or continuum set up across the floor of a meeting room, with the extremes defined by polar opposites (Hale, 1985). Participants are asked to stand and physically place themselves on the continuum to represent their response to the criterion question posed. At the beginning of a group, an example of a less intimate spectrogram criterion might be, “I’ve lived here less than a week ... I’ve lived here more than 60 years.” In finding their location on the continuum, group members have to interact with one another to figure out where they belong. Once group members have found their location, they are invited to share why they placed themselves where they did in the format “I’m standing here because ...” Group members are invited to shift location if, as other group members share, they recognize that another location fits better. Another spectrogram might be defined by the extremes of “I love sports ... I hate sports,” which may seem relatively superficial but can begin to undermine stereotypes and also begin to reveal vulnerable information about painful childhood experiences.

Spectrogram explorations that might be used as group members become more comfortable with and trusting of one another include the following:

- I love being gay ... I hate being gay.
- I have a strong spiritual life ... I have no spiritual life.
- I love my body ... I hate my body.
- I feel totally alone in my life ... I do not feel at all alone in my life.

Even when a group has achieved considerable trust and safety, some issues are best explored indirectly. For instance, attitudes and behaviors about substance abuse or unsafe sex in the community might best be explored with an interpersonal criterion such as “Most gay men do drugs ... most gay men do not do drugs” or “Most gay men are very promiscuous ... most gay men are not at all promiscuous.” As group members share the basis for their selection of a location on the continuum, they have an opportunity to engage in as much self-disclosure as feels comfortable.

### **Target sociograms**

Another method for measuring attitudes or feelings defines a single criterion and locates that criterion as a target, marked with a scarf or other item. Group members are asked to place themselves in proximity to that target, as if it were a bull’s-eye.

For example, a target might be defined by the statement “I feel completely a part of the gay community” so that the further people place themselves from the target, the less they feel a part of the community. Again, as group members share why they chose the location they did, others are invited to shift their position if they wish to. In addition to feelings of isolation and alienation, this sort of exploration also can begin to challenge the concept of a unitary gay community and expose its fractionation into myriad sub-communities, an important insight for group members who feel that there is some singular “in the know” or “mainstream” gay community “out there” from which they feel disconnected or apart.

### **Locograms**

Locograms are an additional sociometric tool wherein multiple locations or spots relevant to a criterion can be marked on the floor utilizing scarves, index cards, or other placeholders. Once again, each group member stands on the location that corresponds to his response (Hale, 1985). For example, to explore issues of identification, group members might be asked to stand at the location that they are most comfortable with today from among these choices: gay, queer, homosexual, transgendered, bisexual, other. In general, “other” is always offered as a locogram choice because it is impossible to anticipate all possible responses. Group members may choose to stand between two locations, such as gay and queer. As group members share why they are standing on their chosen location, they can explain the basis for their choice. For example, a group member might share, “I’m standing between ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ because I use gay with my family, at work, and among people I do not know but I use ‘queer’ when I am with my close friends who also call themselves queer.” The “other” choice in this example allows group members to express uneasiness about naming; for example, “I’m questioning” or “I dislike labeling myself.”

Another example of a locogram might explore relationship status, using the following as criteria:

- married/partnered and not looking
- married/partnered and looking
- single and not looking
- single and looking
- other

Group members are invited to share why they chose the location they selected; the leader might probe further and invite them to share what they like and do not like about their relationship status.

### **Step-in sociometry**

Step-in sociometry is a very efficient way to encourage group members to explore commonalities and to reveal information about themselves to the extent that they are comfortable doing so. Group members are asked to stand in a circle. One at a time a group member steps into the center of the circle and shares something

about himself; other group members step in if they share the same characteristic, feeling, or attitude. Typically, the leader starts this off to demonstrate how it works, stepping into the circle and asking, for example, “Who, like me, has a dog?” Other group members who have a dog or dogs step in and the leader might invite further sharing (breed, name, age). Even so innocuous a criterion can elicit important self-disclosure: “Sometimes my dog is the only reason I’m still alive.” A group member who did not step in might disclose, “My dog died over a year ago and I’m still heartbroken,” thus receiving support by sharing his grief with the group.

Because some group members over-disclose, or disclose prematurely, the leader typically includes guidance, explaining during the exercise that just because something is true one need not share it. Also, since the goal is to identify commonalities, if a group member specifies a criterion that is too narrow—for example, “just came back from Hawaii”—the leader might assist the group member to make the criterion more general—“recently came back from a vacation.” If participation lags, the leader might encourage group members to look around and ask themselves what they are curious about.

In topic-focused groups, the step-in questions can delve into a theme. For example, in a group on aging, possible step-in criteria might be “Who, like me, ... has bad knees? ... needs glasses? ... feels good about aging? ... no longer cares what others think? ... feels like everyone I care about is getting sick or dying? ...,” etc. For a group on connection with the community, criteria might be “Who, like me, ... was born here? ... feels lonely in the city? ... can’t afford to live here? ... is looking for a new job? ...,” etc.

### ***Dyads and triads***

Sharing in subgroups of two or three allows for more intimate self-disclosure, and also gives group members a break after a series of exercises in which they have been on their feet. Topics can range from generic (e.g., “How many stereotypes can you come up with about gay men?” or “Is the gay community spiritually bankrupt?”) to personal (e.g., “What was your worst date ever?” or “What do you like and not like about your body?”). When the whole group risks becoming dominated by a small number of highly extroverted participants, dyads and triads allow those who are less vocal to have an opportunity to share. A series of dyads or triads supports the emergence of new connections among group members and—by encouraging people to share with those they do not know—can help break up cliques that may be emerging.

Such subgroup exercises can be both serious and fun at the same time. For example, the leader might set up a competition for which subgroup can come up with the largest number of stereotypes about gay men, or which group has the worst dating story, and ask the rest of the group to determine a way to honor the winning subgroup. When sharing with the whole group, participants are asked to respect individuals’ confidentiality (e.g., recounting a worst date story without identifying who had told the story to his small group).



Group members also can be invited to reflect on their experience in small groups to learn about how they relate to group situations: How was it? What did you like? Did you feel left out? Were there moments when you wanted to leave the group?

### **Action sociograms**

The action sociogram invites group members to make choices that express preferences for one another on specific criteria. Relationships emerge from choosing and being chosen. As group members make such choices and share their reasons for these choices with one another, connections may emerge and strengthen. In an action sociogram, the leader first establishes that all group members are comfortable being chosen by having another group member place a hand on his shoulder. (If not, another way of designating a selection is agreed upon, such as standing alongside the person being chosen, pointing at him, or being joined by holding a scarf, etc.). Criteria for such explorations can be relatively superficial (e.g., “Place your hand on the shoulder of someone you could ask for advice on where to take a date”). If group members respond that they do not have enough information to make a choice, the leader invites them to trust their intuition or sense of inner knowing. If group members feel they cannot make a choice, they can be invited to “walk around and trust your body.” Once everyone has made a selection, each group member is asked to share why he selected the person he did, making eye contact and speaking directly to the person chosen, in the form “I chose you because ...” As necessary or appropriate, the group leader normalizes a choice based on intuition.

To explore assumptions and perceptions among group members, the leader might use such criteria as, “Place your hand on the shoulder of someone who you think has the fewest problems in social situations ... you think people are most surprised to learn is gay ... you would most like to see march in a Gay Pride parade.” To identify and concretize emerging connections among group members, the leader might pose as possible criteria, “Place your hand on the shoulder of someone you could share a secret with,” explaining that this does not mean the secret would necessarily be shared. To reinforce strengths and positivity, action sociograms that might be used at the end of a group include “Place your hand on the shoulder of someone who made you laugh ... who surprised you ... who took a risk ... who you might go to for some kindness.”

Just as the criteria used in sociometric explorations proceed from periphery (less intimate) to core (more intimate), the progression of sociometric techniques—from spectrograms and target sociograms, through step-in sociometry and dyadic or triadic sharing, to action sociograms—engages group members in deeper intimacy and increasingly vulnerable expressions of connection among group members. A group of strangers efficiently transforms into a safe and cohesive unit that provides its members with an experience of relatedness that counters feelings of isolation.

### **Doubling**

Doubling is a technique in which a group leader or member offers another participant an empathetic deepening of that participant’s feelings or experience, by using

“I” statements as if speaking through the participant; the participant is invited to restate or correct this offering. When a group leader offers a doubling statement, it can allow a member to feel more fully understood, accepted, and encouraged to be more fully expressive. As group members learn to offer doubling statements they practice attunement, compassion, and altruism, which can strengthen their capacity for interpersonal connection.

“Doubling is a psychodramatic technique that allows unspoken dialogue to become explicit” (Leveton, 2005, p. 59). With permission, the leader or a group member stands behind and slightly to the side of the person who is speaking, feels into his experience and energy (Taylor, 1983), and makes a statement as if he is that person (e.g., “I am feeling really anxious about this conversation”). The person has the experience of that statement coming from inside him, and can take a moment to try it on and see if it fits. If it does, he can repeat it in his own words. If it does not, he can change it so it fits for him. Doubling is a wonderful way to help someone get to the feelings underneath what he is saying (or not saying), and to give permission to say what is really going on inside. In the most significant phase of doubling, the double and the person being doubled “reach an almost complete unity of communication; in the acting out of feelings and thoughts, gestures and movements of the subject and the alter ego complement each other, as if they would originate in one and the same person” (Taylor, 1983, p. 62).

Doubling can be a way to explore discrepancies between verbal and physical expressions of emotion. For example, a group member says, “It really bothers me that I can’t bring my boyfriend home to meet my parents” but he has a smile on his face while saying it. The leader might offer the doubling statement “I’m smiling as I say it, but I am really hurt that my family does not accept who I am.”

During an enactment, the leader and group members can use doubling statements to speak the unspoken. For example, in an enactment of a dating situation, doubling statements might include “It’s exhausting being so patient and polite; I just want to take him back to my place and get naked” or “He just ordered dessert and coffee and all I want to do is get out of this as quickly as possible.” Such doubling statements can be a source of fun while at the same time revealing the extent to which people cover up their truths, fail to practice self-care, or hesitate to set boundaries.

Group members may feel inhibited about doubling for fear of “getting it wrong.” The group leader can illustrate that even an inaccurate doubling statement can be helpful because it invites the person being doubled to clarify his true feelings. The group leader might model incorrect doubling to illustrate this principle. For example, if a group member is talking about his fear of using the correct (male) pronoun in talking about his partner among men he plays basketball with, the leader might offer as a presumptive incorrect doubling statement “They might even beat the crap out of me.” In clarifying or correcting this doubling statement, the group member might be able to recognize the extent to which his fear represents catastrophic thinking: “No, I don’t think that; I’m just afraid they will start to avoid me or act uncomfortable around me.”

## Guidelines for sharing

In their pioneering investigation of various forms of encounter groups including psychodrama, Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles (1973, p. 422) observed that personal gains were greatest for those group members among whom “self-disclosure and the expression of positive feeling [was] accompanied by cognitive insight.” Consistent with this recognition, the final phase of a psychodrama, involving group sharing, is regarded as a pivotally important group psychotherapeutic element of a session. The sharing component allows all group members to cognitively integrate their feelings and reactions in response to an enactment. Also, in a psychodrama, the protagonist has made himself extremely vulnerable and there is great potential for reactive feelings of shame unless the protagonist is reintegrated into the group: this is facilitated by having group members share how they can relate to or identify with the protagonist’s situation, experiences, and feelings.

Group members who played roles during an enactment are invited to share not only about how they relate to the enactment but also how it felt to play the role. This “sharing from role” begins with the group member de-roling by saying, “I’m [his own name], not [name of the role; for example, ‘your father Max’].” De-roling is essential to minimize the potential for transferences to emerge. Sharing about the experience of playing a role often provides important insights for the protagonist. For example, in a drama in which a protagonist enacts a confrontation with his mother about her failure to intercede when his father pressured him into competitive sports, the person playing the mother’s role might reveal, during group sharing, “As your mother I was afraid that if I interfered it would only make things worse because he would start calling you a ‘mama’s boy.’”

Because of the importance of group sharing and the vulnerability of all group members, leaders set clear boundaries about appropriate sharing. Members are asked to make only “I” statements that focus on how they can relate to or identify with aspects of the enactment, and are strongly discouraged from giving advice (which can be judgmental, shaming, and isolating for the target of such advice, and which may alienate the advice-giver from the group and the protagonist). Group members are asked to refrain from offering evaluative statements, even affirmative ones (because any such comments create a climate in which group members feel they are all being judged for their courage, spontaneity, willingness, creativity, etc.).

Such guidelines for sharing can be used to shape participant interactions from the outset of a group to promote a sense of self-compassion and mutual identification rather than objectification, manifested as evaluation or unsolicited advice-giving. Thus, the group leader might explain that “In this group, we will emphasize focusing on how we personally relate to or feel about what’s being addressed. We will not offer advice unless someone asks for it. We will use ‘I’ rather than ‘you’ or ‘we’ statements as much as possible.” Consistent with this, when a group member starts to make a statement such as “So when you feel put down for being gay, of course you want to push back,” the leader might gently offer the restatement (as if doubling), “When *I* feel put down for being gay ...” The exception, of course, is when group members

are invited to talk about their perceptions or assumptions about other gay men or the gay community as a whole.

When group members want to directly question other group members or offer unsolicited advice, the leader instead invites the use of doubling because it encourages feelings of empathy and mutual identification and reduces the likelihood of feeling judged. For example, if Sam wants to ask Henry why he is unwilling to forgive his homophobic sibling for years of verbal abuse, or to suggest that he will feel better if he is able to offer forgiveness, the leader would encourage Sam to make his offering as a double: “Maybe I would feel better if I could let go, accept my brother for who he is, and forgive him.” The leader would then reinforce the invitation to Harry to “restate that or put it in your own words if it fits, or correct it if it does not fit.”

### **Putting it all together: Workshops exploring dating**

Although gay men’s feelings of isolation and shame may be both pervasive and debilitating (Downs, 2005), experience indicates that gay men hesitate to come to a group with the identified topic of isolation or loneliness, perhaps because joining such a group is associated with shame about being unpopular or socially disconnected. Instead, groups can be shaped around a myriad of general-interest themes: community norms, aging, dating, coping with or creating new rituals for holidays, living in the city, pets, sex, nonsexual ways to play, hobbies, creative expression, altruism in the community, exercise, eating right, religion and spirituality, etc.

In the following sample workshops we illustrate how the methods just described—which can beneficially be incorporated into any group format—might be integrated into open workshops that explore an issue of concern for many gay men: dating. The first workshop explores this issue through sociometric exercises, with successive rounds of small group sharing. The second workshop adds an additional technique called sociodrama, an action method for exploring shared roles or roles that people have in common. Whereas psychodrama focuses on exploring the personal or individual concerns of a group member, sociodrama creates a generic, hypothetical situation in order to explore social and cultural aspects of the situation or issue (Sternberg & Garcia, 2000). In psychodrama, for instance, a particular group member explores his personal problem with an intrusive roommate or unfaithful partner through enacting a specific interaction, perhaps with a group member holding the role of, respectively, roommate or partner. Sociodrama is used in the second group we describe to explore a general situation in which all group members play roles to examine various aspects of and perspectives on a situation: in this case, a first date.

### ***Gay men dating: Exploring attitudes, feelings, and challenges through sociometry***

#### ***Opening***

As participants arrive, the leader greets them; once several individuals have arrived, they are invited to greet and welcome additional participants to the group. To begin

the group, the leader gathers participants into a circle to establish guidelines for creating a safe space:

- Members say their names. To begin establishing a fun atmosphere, the leader introduces a name game. Going around the circle, the first person says his name; the next person says the first person's name and his own; the third person names the two previous group members and says his own name, and so on until the last person says everyone's name including his own. Group members often forget names as they go around the circle, and the leader normalizes forgetfulness; he may ask who in the group can remember everyone's name and then the group is invited to honor the member who could remember the most names.
- Respect confidentiality (especially about gay identity and, as appropriate, HIV status and other sensitive information, for example, when encountering group members outside the group in the community). The leader instructs members to follow the guideline that what happens in the group stays in the group, except to talk about their feelings in response to what happened without sharing specifics of what others said or did. The leader clarifies his obligation to break confidentiality if anyone discloses intent to harm self or others or acknowledges child or elder abuse.
- Allow yourself to be uncomfortable but endure nothing.
- Share from your own experience. Use "I" statements rather than "you" or "we" statements whenever possible. Do not offer advice unless asked to do so.
- Doubling is explained and illustrated as an alternative to giving advice, asking questions, or using "you" statements.
- Be appropriate about self-disclosure: balance being forthcoming and taking risks with "too much information."
- Celebrate diversity in the community.
- Safe touch guidelines: ask permission, do not assume.
- Check in about whether anyone has a special need or otherwise needs to give a "mini report" about anything pressing they came into the group with (for example, "I got fired from my job today").
- Time boundary: what time the group will end.
- Introduce topic: dating
- "Well of confidentiality": Group members stand in a circle, reach their right hands into the center, thumbs extended; each member encircles the thumb of the person to his right, forming a closed, connected circle. The leader asks each participant to speak his name down into the center of the well as a way to express concretely his commitment to maintain confidentiality.

### ***Sociometric explorations***

In these examples, criteria are specified with the understanding that, as group members begin to share and interact, the leader facilitates exploration, identification, and clarification as with any interpersonal process group.

- Locogram: Personally I feel comfortable dating; I date but do not feel comfortable; I never date; other.
- Spectrogram: How many dates have you had in your life, range from “I’ve had none” to “I’ve had hundreds”; group members will have to share with one another to determine their location on the continuum.
- Step-in focused on the topic of dating: “Who, like me, ... finds it difficult to be himself? ... can be judgmental? ... spends all his time trying to decide if I want to kiss the man I’m with? ... would never go out for Ethiopian food? ... primarily dates men of his own age? ...,” etc.

### ***Group discussion***

With the group as a whole, brainstorm what might be three to five important issues regarding gay dating based on what has come up during the previous explorations. The leader writes these issues on an easel or board as they are identified by group members; for instance: dating younger men, physical affection and/or sex on a first date, being judgmental or fear of being judged, etc. Each participant is then invited to self-select into a smaller group on one of the topics identified by the group as a whole. (If a topic has only one member, he is asked to make a second choice and join another group.) Small groups are given 10 to 15 minutes and asked to make sure that everyone gets his turn to share about his experience. When about five minutes remain, the leader asks the subgroups to focus on a lesson learned or one idea that would be helpful to the entire group right now. When the group reports back to the group as a whole, to respect confidentiality its conclusions are to be stated generally rather than attributing a specific experience or thought to a particular individual.

### ***Closure***

After group-as-a-whole sharing, the leader asks for a specific, limited number (depending on group size [e.g., seven]) of “appreciations” that the leader models: “I really appreciated how funny you were, Pete, when you described your worst date ever.” Each group member gets no more than one opportunity to offer an appreciation. Then group members are invited to pause for a moment of inner reflection, identifying how the group experience affected them. The group stands and participates in a second “well of confidentiality.” The leader claps three times as a ritual to mark the end of the group.

## ***The dating experience: A sociodramatic approach***

### ***Opening***

The same approach would be used for opening the group as in part one. Because this session will employ the enactment of a sociodrama, the leader ensures that group members understand doubling and have an opportunity to practice during the opening circle. To help participants let go of the day and be present, the leader asks group members to participate in a spectrogram using a continuum from “I’ve had a horrible day” to “I’ve had a wonderful day.”

### **Group sharing**

To form triads and to help ensure that group members who do not know one another have an opportunity to interact and to minimize the potential for cliques to form, the leader has group members count off. Triads are asked to come up with their list of dos and don'ts for first dates. The leader then brings participants back to the group as a whole and asks members to report back on what they discussed.

### **Sociodrama of a first date**

With the group warmed up to the theme of first dates, the leader explains that the group will be invited to role-play a first date in three scenes: meeting at a bar, having dinner at an Italian restaurant, and a goodnight scene at the door of one of the men's residence. The leader sets a safety boundary that this is "only a role play; we're not here to make out." The leader asks for volunteers to play the two men having a first date. If no one volunteers, the leader invites the group to nominate people to play those roles, explaining that accepting that assignment will be of service to the entire group. The leader reminds group members that anyone can double anyone in any role at any time. The bar scene can engage various group members to play other patrons or the bartender; the restaurant scene can engage various group members to play the role of waiter and other diners; the goodnight scene can include passers-by or neighbors watching what happens. Group members are encouraged to use their spontaneity and creativity as they identify and step into these ancillary roles.

As each scene is enacted, the leader may invite role reversals in which two people who are interacting are invited to step into the shoes/role of the other. For instance, when one of the men in the dating dyad poses a question, he may have the two men reverse roles so that he can come up with an answer to the question he posed. For example, if one man asks the other, "So, how do you feel about life here in San Francisco?" the leader may call for a role reversal so that the individual who posed the question has to answer it. In doing so, he might recognize what dilemmas, uncertainties, self-consciousness, or defensiveness the question could evoke, or identify what he was really trying to find out (e.g., Are you promiscuous? Do you go out to bars a lot?).

The leader invites and offers doubling, both to raise, and especially to encourage group members to have fun with, the issues. The leader might double the bartender pointing to two other patrons saying, "Those two over there need to get a room." A group member might double one of the men on a date in the restaurant saying, "Oh no, I just splashed spaghetti sauce all over my shirt; how embarrassing!" The doorstep scene evokes all sorts of questions about sex on a first date, self-image, safer sex negotiations, etc., all of which can be explored through doubling and role reversal.

### **Closure**

At the end of the third vignette, the leader brings the group back together so that everyone who played a role (or roles) de-roles: for example, "I'm not the bartender; I'm Bill" and "I'm not the nosy neighbor; I'm Riley." As each group member de-roles,

the leader leads the group in applause for their contributions. The leader then asks the group to form into triads and invites participants to share both from the role and also what came up for them on a personal level during the enactment, with regard to the theme of first dates and with regard to the experience of sociodramatic enactment. The group is then brought back together and participants are asked to name three or four tips about first dates that everyone can take away from the group. The leader asks for a closing “well of confidentiality,” and concludes the group with the ritual of three claps.

### **Impact of action methods on participants**

A drop-in program supported by the Shanti Project in San Francisco used group formats such as those described here to bring together diverse drop-in groups of between 10 and 25 gay men—many of them HIV positive or diagnosed with AIDS—during more than a decade. Some men were regular participants; many were only occasional or infrequent attendees. Absent formal impact evaluations, a small subset of group members contacted several years after attending their last such group provided retrospective anecdotal impressions. They were asked what was most memorable about the group(s) they attended; what was most beneficial; what changes they observed in themselves or among other participants; and what impact, if any, the group had on feelings of isolation. Next, we quote their verbatim responses.

#### ***Most memorable***

- The thing that I remember is being very scared in the beginning and feeling really well-liked—even loved—at the end.
- Experiencing other guys’ vulnerability and observing the willingness to be open and their struggle around that.
- The first time we met I realized that this could be a process to draw me out into something else. It could be healthy and give me direction. It was exciting to know that in my early forties here in the middle of my life I was able to build something meaningful.
- It was fun to be brought out of isolation in the first place. It brought the [inner] child back to a safe place. I could make a mistake in a playful safe way. My mistakes no longer became something I felt bad about. I found myself laughing and becoming okay with them. Overall, I found a huge amount of growth.
- It felt fun and bonding.

#### ***Most beneficial***

- Meeting new friends that I am still friends with . . . I have continued to maintain friendships with these guys.
- It was helpful to get me out of my routine and doing something different.
- The small groups were the most effective for me. Very safe.



- Connecting with other people, because so many participants spoke about isolation and how it impacted their lives—myself included.
- Being in the process was the best. Repeating the actions and doing them weekly put healthy behaviors into my life.

### ***Changes in yourself or other group members***

- I surprised myself with the ability to participate and open up. My normal inclination is to back off, and this allowed me to step up. I saw other guys start to work with other people. They were so used to being bossy or not participating so this kind of group kind of normalized them.
- I went from “don’t touch me, don’t kiss me” to “Kiss, kiss, hug me now, baby.”
- I noticed an increase[d] ease in talking in a group setting among the other guys.
- I found myself consciously making new choices. It was a safe space to put a toe in the water of a new choice.
- I saw guys feel supported and relax more. Having people in the same boat helped me feel more comfortable.

### ***Impact on isolation***

- It forced me to pull out of isolation that I tend to lean toward. We did things I would never have done before and would have been impossible without guidance. For instance, daring to think what another man might be feeling. Also talking about sexual things—I don’t usually talk to other people about these things.
- I definitely feel that I have a better esteem about my homosexuality. That group really helped see that there are different flavors but we all are connected by similar issues.
- I knew that if I didn’t show up I would affect the group. I actually felt important. It was so important especially when I first came to San Francisco. I gradually got to know people.
- I was invited to help someone and make friends with another guy who I would have never met. The right choice was to let our paths cross. It was painless.
- They gave me a chance to experience discomfort with some strangers. It was intimate and uncomfortable. Once I was on the other side of it I felt okay. I felt a little shift, like “Okay, I can do this[;] okay, we can do this.” It was very challenging for me.

### **Conclusion**

As Moreno’s contemporary, group psychotherapist L. Cody Marsh, observed, “By the crowd they have been broken, by the crowd they shall be healed” (Bloom, 1998, p. 179). Wounds of shame and isolation—inflicted by the dominant sexual culture, often transmitted by family members starting in early childhood, and reinforced at

times by shaming within LGB communities—are mitigated by practical experiential techniques of psychodrama that group leaders can employ to lower shame, increase connectedness, and strengthen participants' capacities for establishing new or more robust interpersonal relationships.

## ORCID

Michael Gross  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2452-1401>

## References

- Alessi, E. J., Martin, J. L., Gyamerah, A., & Meyer, I. H. (2013). Prejudice events and traumatic stress among heterosexuals and lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 22(5), 510–526.
- Andersen, J. P., & Blosnich, J. (2013). Disparities in adverse childhood experiences among sexual minority and heterosexual adults: Results from a multi-state probability-based sample. *PLOS One*, 8(1), e54691. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0054691
- Austin, A., Herrick, H., & Proescholdbell, S. (2016). Adverse childhood experiences related to poor adult health among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *American Journal of Public Health*, 106(2), 314–320.
- Badenoch, B. (2008). Through the lens of diagnosis: Depression, anxiety, dissociation and addiction. In *Being a brain-wise therapist* (pp. 119–152). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Blatner, A. (2000). *Foundations of psychodrama: History, theory, and practice* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Springer.
- Bloom, S. L. (1998). By the crowd they have been broken, by the crowd they shall be healed: The social transformation of trauma. In R. Tedeschi, C. Park, & L. Calhoun (Eds.), *Post-traumatic growth: Positive changes in the aftermath of crises* (pp. 173–208). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Campbell, J. (2014). Psychodrama, sociometry and the transition from self-loathing to self-love. *The British Journal of Psychodrama and Sociometry*, 27(1–2), 80–103.
- Campbell, J. (2015). Using action methods when working with couples. *The Therapist*, November/December, 13–16.
- Charuvastra, A., & Cloitre, M. (2008). Social bonds and posttraumatic stress disorder. *Annual Reviews of Psychology*, 59, 301–328.
- Downs, A. (2005). *The velvet rage*. Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press/Perseus Books.
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245–258.
- Fredriksen-Goldsen, K. I., Kim, H., Shiu, C., Goldsen, J., & Emlet, C. A. (2014). Successful aging among LGBT adults: Physical and mental health-related quality of life by age group. *The Gerontologist*, 55(1), 154–158.
- Garcia, A., & Buchanan, D. R. (2000). Psychodrama. In P. Lewis & D. R. Johnson (Eds.), *Current approaches in drama therapy* (pp. 162–195). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publishing, Ltd.
- Gendron, T. L., Pendleton, T., & White, J. T. (2016). Mental health counseling of LGBT elders. In D. A. Harley & P. B. Teaster (Eds.), *Handbook of LGBT elders* (pp. 455–471). Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Hale, A. E. (1985). *Conducting clinical sociometric explorations: A manual for sociometrists and psychodramatists*. Roanoke, VA: Royal Publishing.

- Hale, A. E. (2006, October 6). *Sociometry: Expanding on the meaning of the term*. Retrieved from <http://sociometry.net/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=20>
- Hatzenbuehler, M. L., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2014). Structural stigma and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical axis reactivity in lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 47*(1), 39–47.
- Herek, G. M., Chopp, R., & Strohl, D. (2007). Sexual stigma: Putting sexual minority health issues in context. In I. H. Meyer & M. E. Northridge (Eds.), *The health of sexual minorities* (pp. 171–208). New York, NY: Springer.
- Herrick, A. L., Stall, R., Chmiel, J. S., Guadamuz, T. E., Penniman, T., Shoptaw, S., ... Plankey, M. W. (2013). It gets better: Resolution of internalized homophobia over time and associations with positive health outcomes among MSM. *AIDS & Behavior, 17*(4), 1423–1430.
- Leveton, Eva (2005). Escaping the blame frame: Experiential techniques with couples. *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama & Sociometry, 58*(2), 55–69.
- Lieberman, M. A., Yalom, I. D., & Miles, M. B. (1973). *Encounter groups: First facts*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Marineau, R. (2007). The birth and development of sociometry: The work and legacy of Jacob Moreno (1889–1974). *Social Psychology Quarterly, 70*(4), 322–325.
- Meyer, I. H. (2007). Prejudice and discrimination as social stressors. In I. H. Meyer & M. E. Northridge (Eds.), *The health of sexual minorities* (pp. 242–267). New York, NY: Springer.
- Moreno, J. L. (1946). *Psychodrama: Vol 1*. Beacon, NY: Beacon House.
- Mustanski, B., Andrews, R., & Puckett, J. A. (2016). The effects of cumulative victimization on mental health among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents and young adults. *American Journal of Public Health, 106*(3), 527–533.
- Proujansky, R. A., & Pachankis, J. E. (2014). Toward formulating evidence-based principles of LGB-affirmative psychotherapy. *Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy, 10*(2), 117–131.
- Sternberg, S., & Garcia, A. (2000). *Sociodrama: Who's in Your Shoes?* (2nd ed.). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Taylor, G. S. (1983). The effect of nonverbal doubling on the emotional response of the double. *Journal of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, 36*(2), 61–68.
- Yalom, I., & Leszcz, M. (2005). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.