

Validity and honesty in sociometric testing a brief answer by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

All answers given by respondents on a sociometric test are valid as the answers are their answers. The question of validity more often arises in reference to the interpretation of sociometric test data and the analysis offered by persons examining the data and wanting to attribute meaning to the test results.¹ Each person declaring choices on an objective data sheet and making perceptual guesses about other persons choices for oneself readies him or herself to engage in an exploration which has both public and private dimensions and potential consequences once the data becomes known.

Ideally, the persons taking part in a sociometric test have agreed to provide answers to the following questions: Whom do I choose to _____ (supply criterion)? Whom do I not choose to _____ (supply same criterion) ? Whom do I choose to remain neutral toward based on the criterion _____ (supply same criterion)? There is space given on the objective data sheet for the person to write the reasons for this choice. Being able to give an honest answer in both the selection of choice category and in the reason stated depends on the trust the respondents have in the group environment, the resources the group and leader have for addressing both intimacy and conflict, and the capacities of the persons to be authentic in the moment. In addition, the criterion needs to be one which does not exceed the person's level of threat, or their idea of what is indeed relevant for the group to explore.² The assumption is made that honest answers to choice questions are more likely to surface when anxiety decreases. Having a criterion which makes sense to you, will reveal information useful to you and the group, and which does not threaten group members beyond their immediate comfort level is more likely to provide believable data.

As a trainer you may want to have the training group engage in an experiment. It is one which requires that each group member fill in two sets of objective data sheets, and one perceptual data sheet. The first objective data sheet is deeply honest and is not made public to any group member or the leader.³ The second data sheet is as honest as they can be here and now and will be made public to the group members. The perceptual data will also be made public. The training group chooses someone outside their training environment to examine all the test data and to report back to each person a finding on the number of accurate perceptions made by group members of the more privately held data and the publicly revealed data. This report will either substantiate that group members (and which group members) are likely to know their more deeply held truth or will identify the degree of accuracy of perception group members have of the data made public.

Engaging in this experimental sociometric test can stimulate the training group's interest in authentic communication and blocks which exist in being fully disclosing. What is likely to surface are ways a person is self protective, protective of others or protective of the training environment. Persons who have a history of distaste for conflict are likely to need a slower pace and to require a "success experience" being conflictual without brutal or humiliating elements. The trainer can assist trainees in managing this kind of environment. Being able to skillfully explore conflict is a requirement before sociometric tests can be part of the trainee's repertoire.

1 Mouton, Jane Srygley, Robert R. Blake and Benjamin Fruchter (1955) "The Validity of Sociometric Responses" Sociometry, Vol. 18, no.3 (August) p. 181-200.

2 In 2000 I revised with assistance from Jim Leach, JD, TEP a one page data sheet titled "Examining the Sociometric Criterion". This document will soon be available on the contents section of the web site.

3 Ann E. Hale and Linnea Carlson-Sabelli (April 30, 1990) "Data Sheet for Experimental Sociometric Test Examining Publicly Revealed Choice Data and the Use of the Confidential Option" Unpublished document. This document will soon be available in the Contents segment of this site.

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