Take Your Pick:
3 Ways to Make A Social Atom

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Social atom basics

= Female

= Male

= Genderless (to represent problem, obstacle, pet, other.

= Deceased female

= Deceased male

= Deceased pet, other
(alternative from notional reference, below)

--- = Mutual attraction

------------- = Mutual rejection

------------- = Mutual indifference or neutral

Notational system for social atoms

This is the most basic notational system; many more variation are possible. For more information, see “Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations: A Manual for Psychodramatics and Sociometrists,” Royal Publishing Co., Roanoke, Va. James Vander May, “A Perceptual Social Atom Sociogram,” in Ann E. Hale, ed., Volume 28 (1975) 128-134.
A social atom is a sociometric exercise traditionally done with pencil and paper. It involves making a diagram of significant relationships in a person’s life.

The “nucleus” of the atom is the self in the center, and the “orbiting” figures represent people that are significant in the person’s universe of relationships. Symbols for the other people may be placed as near or as far on paper to represent their closeness or lack of closeness in life.

There are traditional symbol notations:

- Circles represent females
- Triangles represent males
- Circles or triangles with broken lines indicate people who have died and remain emotionally present for the individual
- Rectangles may be added to identify places or other abstract things.

Depending on the setting, some psychodramatists like to include significant relationships other than people, including pets, houses, money, chemical substances or food.

Lines may be drawn from the self to the others to indicate positive, negative or neutral feelings, which in psychodrama refer to the tele — the invisible energy related to the relationship.

The social atom is useful for the client to learn more about himself or herself in a number of ways in individual sessions and in group sessions. It is also a useful tool for the psychotherapist in making assessments of support systems and family relationships.

Regarding the atom’s usefulness to the client, creation of the atom can serve as a good warm-up to a drama or vignette in a group or individual setting.

The act of using paper and pencil to concretize important relationships warms the person to disruptions in social relationships. Most practitioners prefer to use pencils, rather than pens, because the client will revisit and revise relationships as they notice their feelings and thoughts and an eraser will ease the changes that may be made.

Acknowledgment of persons who are deceased may bring up unresolved grief and loss issues, and conflicts in relationships with people who are alive may also emerge.

As the client creates his or her atom and shares and listens to the descriptions of others’ atoms, the warm up continues to allow for common concerns to develop.

The personal awareness that emerges within the client may serve as material to investigate in traditional talk therapy or for later exploration within a drama.

Atoms may be generalized to persons in the present day or persons in the childhood family. They also may be made specific for various populations in treatment or another setting. Addictions counselors working with substance abusers, for instance, may ask a substance abuser to chart his or her peers and family with a social atom and then mark the people in the atom who enable the person’s substance-abusing behavior.

These exercises can serve as exceptional interventions to explore behavior patterns, such as enabling, or unconscious preferences that then become conscious. The patterns can be further explored during group sessions and with dramas as the person becomes willing to investigate them.

- Excerpted from “Show and Tell Psychodrama: Skills for Therapists, Coaches, Teachers, Leaders” by Karen Carnabucci.
Although the classic social atom is constructed with pencil and paper (using pencil if the client decides to make changes with erasing) social atoms also may be constructed in many ways:

- Stuffed animals
- Marbles or glass pebbles
- Small stones or shells
- Sand tray figures in placed in sand tray or on sheet of construction paper
- Sheets of paper placed on carpet (colors may be used for different people)
- Place mats (use plastic or vinyl mats to place on carpet to stand on)
- Rectangles of felt
- Sponges, pillows, blocks
- Tarot or oracle cards
- Clippings of pictures from magazines, made into a collage
- Shoe insoles or “footprints” cut from paper or foam craft sheets

To involve group members more directly, the members of the group may take roles in the sculptures.

If the therapeutic task is to build a healthy support network, a client can diagram a new atom periodically (once a month, for example) in the therapy setting or at home to observe the progress in accomplishing this goal.

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Basic social atom

Use paper and pencil to diagram social atom of particular set of relationships in the here and now. Share with others, journal about relationship awareness. Alternatively, the protagonist may use objects or art.

Social atom with psychodrama

Use paper and pencil to diagram social atom of particular set of relationships. Protagonist and director sets up social atom with group members taking roles as auxiliaries. (If no group is available, use props.) Put into action on stage with role reversals, and have auxiliaries approximate protagonist’s reality. Proceed with vignette using doubling, role reversals and mirroring to conclusion.

Social atom with systemic constellations

Use paper and pencil to diagram social atom of particular set of relationships. Protagonist and director sets up social atom with group members taking roles as representatives. (If no group is available, use props.) Put into action by having representatives take positions and sense the energy in the field and report out loud. Add representative if missing according to Orders of Love and/or reposition as necessary with healing sentences. Proceed with vignette to conclusion.

Orders of Love, as identified by Bert Hellinger, developer of systemic constellations

- Everyone has a right to belong to the family.
- Wrongs in past generations must be redressed.
- People have rank according to who entered the system first.
Who Shall Survive?
J.L. Moreno
Beacon Press
1953


Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations: A Manual for Psychodramatists and Sociometrists
Ann E. Hale
Royal Publishing Co.
1981

Impromptu Man: J.L. Moreno and the Origins of Psychodrama, Encounter Culture, and the Social Network
Jonathan Moreno
Bellevue Literary Press
2014

Captures the remarkable impact of a singular genius, J.L. Moreno, whose creations—the best-known being psychodrama—have shaped our culture in myriad ways, many unrecognized. Written by his son, his studies of social networks laid the groundwork for social media like Twitter and Facebook.

Show and Tell Psychodrama: Skills for Therapists, Coaches, Teachers, Leaders
Karen Carnabucci
Nusanto Publishing
2014

Bite-size articles about application of psychodrama in therapeutic and other settings; ideal for study guide for psychodrama certification candidate, students and other professionals.

The Social Atom: Why the Rich Get Richer, Cheaters Get Caught, and Your Neighbor Usually Looks Like You
Mark Buchanan
Bloomsbury
2007

Although the author does not give a credit to J.L. Moreno, he attempts to model each human actor as an individual atom in the crowd of the masses. Look at patterns, not people, Buchanan argues, and rules emerge that can explain how movements form, how interest groups operate, and even why ethnic hatred persists. Using similar observations, social physicists can predict whether neighborhoods will integrate, whether stock markets will crash, and whether crime waves will continue or abate.

Acting-In: Practical Applications of Psychodramatic Methods, Third Edition
Adam Blatner
Springer Publishing Company
1996

This volume presents current training techniques and shows how to use them, whether as a complement to traditional verbal approaches, in individual or group therapy, in educational or community settings, or in many other contexts.

Practical Applications of Mandalas (Part 2: Further Applications)
Adam Blatner
American Art Therapy Association
2009

Online article demonstrating how mandala concept can be used with social atoms. Available online at http://www.blatner.com/adam/constransf/mandalapplications/further2.html
Set up of social atom with place mats, in group room of Karen Carnabucci.

"The Cereal’s Universe" by Roz Chast.

Social atom in nest of scarf, in sand tray in Karen Carnabucci's office.

Simple social atom with stones and sand tray object in Karen Carnabucci's office on piece of paper.
About Karen Carnabucci

Karen Carnabucci, MSS, LCSW, TEP, is a licensed clinical social worker and board-certified trainer, educator and practitioner of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy. She has trained with Zerka Moreno, J.L Moreno's widow and collaborator in psychodrama, and Heinz Stark, a leading trainer in Systemic Constellation Work.

A frequent presenter at the annual conference of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, she practices, teaches and writes about psychodrama, constellation work, guided imagery, sand tray and other experiential therapies.

She is the founder of the Lake House Health and Learning Center in Racine, Wis., and offers supervision for social workers in Wisconsin and Ohio and training in psychodrama and sociometry nationally.

Karen is the author of:

- “Show and Tell Psychodrama: Skills for Therapists, Coaches, Teachers and Leaders.”

She is the co-author of two books:

- “Integrating Psychodrama and Systemic Constellation Work: New Directions for Action Methods, Mind-Body Therapies and Energy Healing” with the late Ron Anderson
- “Healing Eating Disorders with Psychodrama and Other Action Methods: Beyond the Silence and the Fury” with Linda Ciotola.