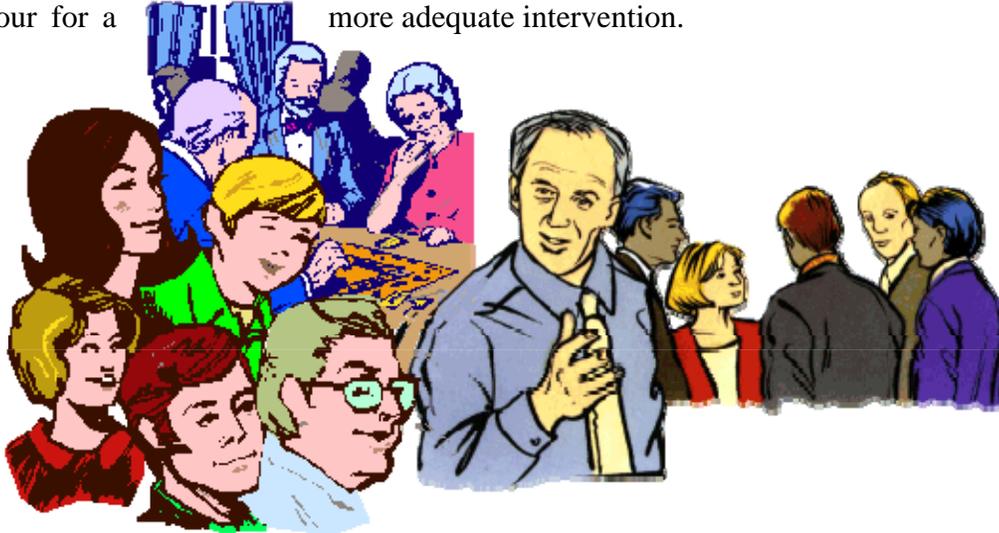


The sociogram, a complementary tool to the genogram and a means of enriching the interview

By Margot Phaneuf, RN, Ph.D.

The nurse's interview with a patient enables the attainment of different objectives, amongst others to gather information which will help understand their life experience and behaviour for a more adequate intervention.



This meeting, as all personal contacts, should be carried out in a Rogerian approach of confidence, non-judgment and positive consideration, for the interview is a highly important professional act. It requires knowledge of interpersonal behaviour, and a good dose of sensitivity and diplomacy with respect to the process of questioning. And above all, it requires “presence” which enables one to have a compassionate and open mind.

The sociogram as a tool which reveals the relationships between people

The genogram gives us precious information about the composition of the family and the interactions and influences between generations but it does not show the nature of the relationships within a family nor those with the exterior environment, which may be very useful in certain situations. A practical and concrete way is to use another tool of sociology, the sociogram with its two variants: the sociogram of the familial attachment group and the targeted sociogram.

Definition and diverse applications

In the context of this article, the sociogram has many facets. It is above all a graphic representation, a social diagram of the relationships which a person has with his family, this is known as the sociogram of the family attachment group. But the sociogram is also intended for the collateral members of the family and the exterior social group.

The sociogram

Is a graphic representation which serves to reveal and analyse the relationships of a person with their family or social circle, or to visualise the relationships within the family or of certain members of the family with their external environment such as health and education services, leisure time activities, work, friends or place in the extended family.

Both personal and professional relationships are taken into account. They may involve principally the members of the family (grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews, grand children), friends and neighbours, supervisors and work colleagues, school personnel or classmates. But it is also possible to establish more general ties with various institutions such as the workplace, health services, leisure time services, etc. This is what we can see in the first example of the sociogram of the Hubert family. We can also see that according to our needs, this strategy can become more analytical, in which case it takes the form of a “**targeted sociogram**”.

The basis of this strategy

The sociogram was developed a long time ago by Jacob Levi Moreno, a Roumanian psychiatrist, whose writings on sociometry and psychodramas are well known. He presented this tool in 1933 and since then it has served as a means of showing what takes place in a group. On a theoretical level, the use to which this visual concept has been put classes it amongst the strategies used in the study of restricted groups of which the most well known theorist is Kurt Lewin. Since then it is he who has had the greatest influence on its use and interpretation.

Objectives

This sociological approach is used in several ways and in pursuing various objectives. The first is to demonstrate the group dynamic surrounding the individual observed, whether it be their immediate family, or others in their surroundings such as their belonging group, their reference group, their functional group or their affinity group.

A human being is born within a family, with parents who protect him, a family circle and a specific environment. This is known as the **belonging group**, with which, in one way or another, the person maintains a lifelong tie.

Belonging group:
This is the human environment in which a person evolves, that is, family, friends and immediate social surroundings.

A human group, whatever its nature, always presents a particular character, with specific values, distinct cultural tastes, a dynamic and an ideology which make it unique. The persons, groups or organisations which serve as role models for the person's moral, religious or political conduct is the **reference group**. The sociogram can target either one or the other of these groups. **The functional group** has as its primary objective a professional function, such as worker, nurse, teacher, student or other; whereas an **affinity group**, is concerned with the persons who associate by choice.

Another objective of the sociogram is to reveal in a concrete and specific manner the type of relationship which a person has with each family member and with the different groups to which they belong. This enables us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their support network, which is very important for their care, or if we want to know what the relationship is between a worker and his supervisor or work colleagues.

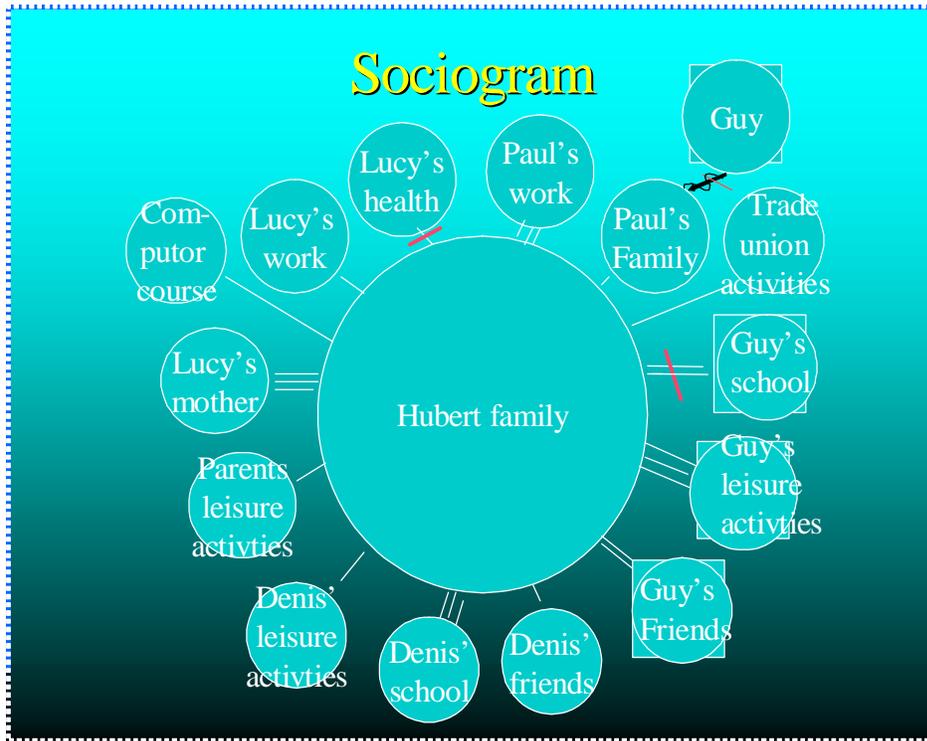
Reference group:
all of the persons, groups or organisations which influence a person's values and behaviour.

This strategy also enables us to show the nature of the child's social ties at school and at play, which facilitates the comprehension of their psychological reactions and is a measure of their capacity to establish relationships. In psychiatry, these objectives are extremely important. By this means one can discern if the subject is isolated, or even rejected or if he has a significant relationship with someone, if he has accepted the rules of the group, or if he is dysfunctional. This sociometric tool consequently enables one to have a clearer image of the person's position and influence in his group and to know where one needs to intervene in order to better their socialization.

Interpretation

In this graphic representation, as in the genogram, the intensity of the ties is indicated by a code of lines: a dotted line indicates a weak relationship, and as the dots get weaker, the relationship is weaker.

If the dotted line is white, the relationship is almost non-existent. A single line shows a



good bond, two lines a closer bond and three lines a relationship which is even more important, but also **conflicting**. A line with a slash represents a difficulty. A broken line or with two slashes signifies a rupture, while a zigzag line reveals a conflict. An arrow indicates a unilateral relationship, that

is, the subject feels an attachment to the indicated person or group but this is not reciprocal, in other words, the indicated person or group reject them. The arrow can also indicate a particular responsibility or inversely, for example, the case of a daughter who takes care of her mother. The subject observed is indicated by a double circle, a circle within a square or their name is written in letters of a different colour.

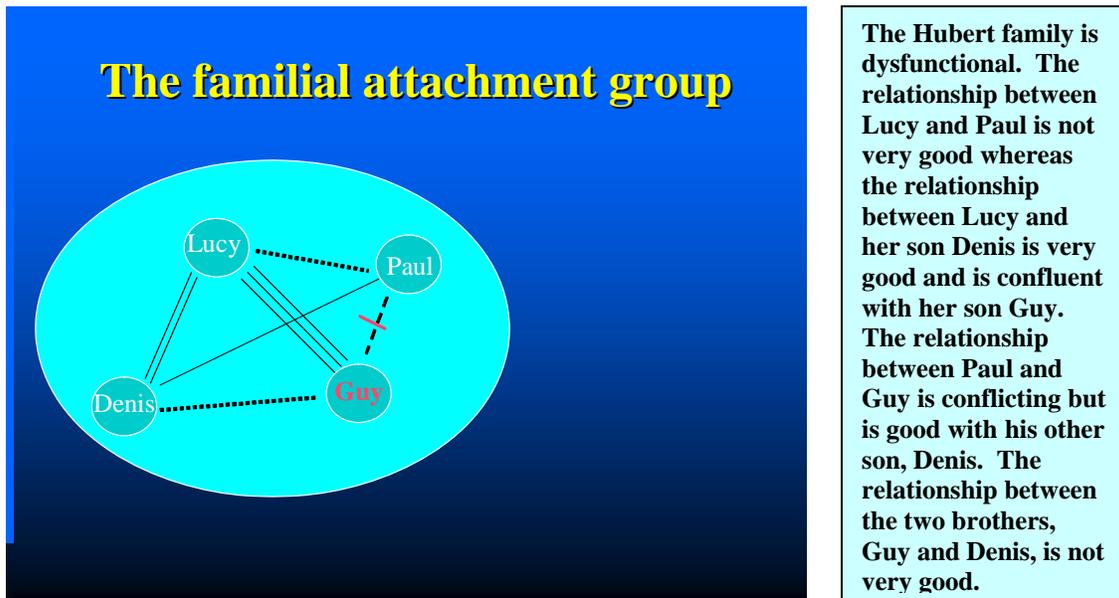
The dimensions depend on what one wants to show, for example, we might want to show the openness of a family system to exterior human relationships i.e. friendships, the enlarged family, leisure time activities or even the relationship of a single person to their work environment, eg. a nurse with her work team or a student with a few of his classmates. This visual tool complements the other two sociological tools: the genogram and the diagram of the attachment group, both of which favour the study of the family group.

The first example

The attached example shows the ensemble of the relationships of the Hubert family: Paul, the father, Lucy, the mother, Guy and Denis, their two sons, with their in-laws, the health and educational system, the mother and father's professional activities and their involvement in social organisations. It also shows the children's relationship with their school, their leisure time activities and their friends. Guy is the problem child who is being observed.

One can thus see that Paul is intensely involved with his work which signifies that he is somewhat absent at home especially since he is involved with trade union work. Moreover, his relationship with his family of origin is not very strong. As far as Lucy is concerned, one notices that she works outside the home, is taking a computer course and that she has some health problems all of which suggest that this may be causing some difficulties. Moreover, she has a very strong, even **confluent** relationship with her mother and with Guy. There is not much evidence of leisure time activities shared by the entire family.

These observations indicate several factors of imbalance. As far as the children are concerned, Denis is a good student who is not too distracted by friends or his leisure time



activities; whereas his brother Guy has trouble in school but has a network of friends who occupy his leisure time which may be a cause of his school problems and a compensation for what is missing in the family since there is a conflicting relationship with his father. He is a problem child.

The second example

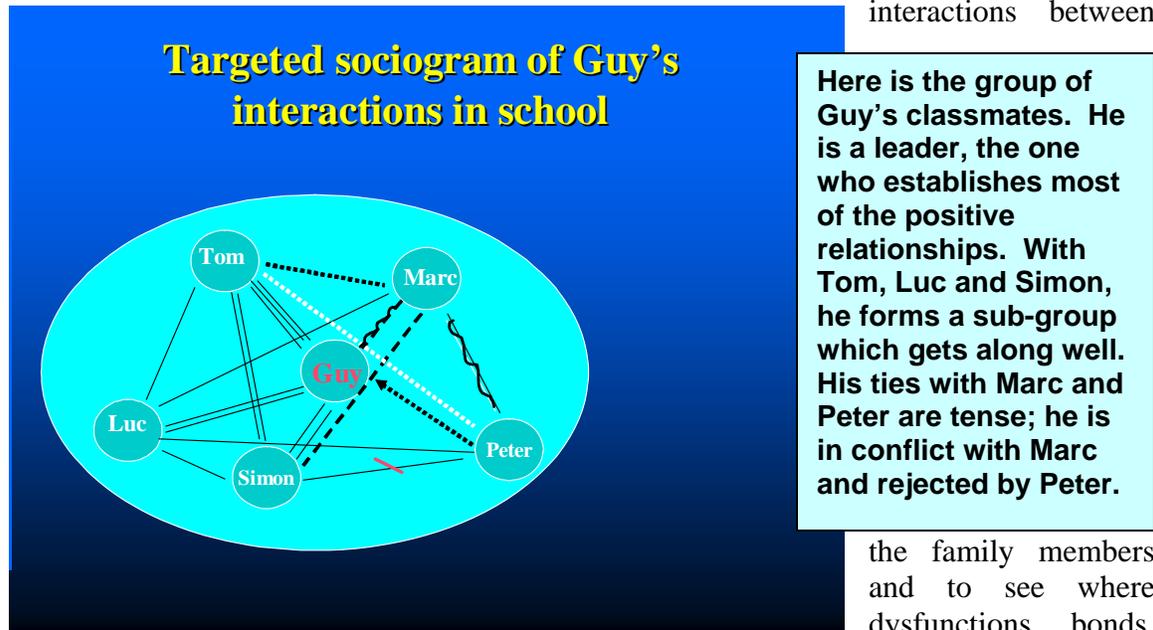
The second example is centred on Lucy who is undergoing psychiatric care. It is more detailed and indicates that Lucy is suffering from depression and is unemployed, that her widowed mother also suffers from depression and that their **too close** relationship is not harmonious. As for Paul, we can see that he has broken ties with his own family but maintains some ties with Lucy's family. We can also see that his relationship with Guy is broken.

If the sociogram reveals a particular difficulty for one of the persons, we can dig deeper by proceeding with a diagram of the familial attachment group. It enables us to better understand the basic internal dynamic and gives us information on the quality of the

intrafamily ties. This is what we can see in the example for Guy, the problem child of the couple Lucy-Paul

Usefulness

In psychiatry, this diagram enables us to visualize in a concrete manner the nature of the interactions between



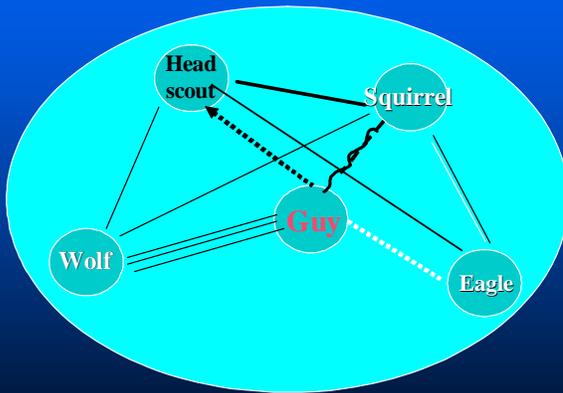
the family members and to see where dysfunctions, bonds, rejections, and conflicts occur. Such a tool is also useful in pediatrics when one wants to better understand what is going on in the environment of a sick child. Isn't it true that a picture is worth a thousand words?

The targeted sociogram

But intrafamily relationships are not the only ones that can be revealed. In a family, or any other kind of group, if one person is dysfunctional, one may want to examine their social environment at school, at work or even in the enlarged family. A targeted sociogram can help us to further understand the relationship between the subject and the persons closest to them in their school, work or leisure time environment. In this diagram we can see that Guy has three good friends, even a very strong relationship with Tom. One could say that these friends form an *affinity group*. One can also notice that he is in conflict with Marc and is rejected by Pierre. His intra and extra-family difficulties reveal the limits of his capacity to form relationships and may explain his difficult behaviour. From this illustration we can better understand how we should intervene.

We can thus notice, that these sociological tools are an interesting means of favouring an

Targeted sociogram of Guy's interactions with his scout reference group



Here is Guy's reference scout group. We notice that he feels rejected by the head scout, that he has a very strong, probably dependent relationship with Small Wolf, a conflicting relationship with Squirrel and that his ties with Eagle are just about non-existent.

awareness of the functional and relational problems of a person. They are not only invaluable in nursing and psychiatric care, but also in educational and work organisations, etc. when one wants to better understand the dynamics which are occurring in a school or professional group.

The relationship with a reference group

The last example shows the relationship between Guy and his scout group. A comparison of the social tools used shows that this child has difficult relationships in all the spheres to which he belongs. The diagram of his reference group also shows that he seeks an authority figure, probably to replace his absent father with whom he is in conflict; unfortunately, Guy feels rejected by him.

Creation of the sociogram

As with all the other strategies of a relational nature, the sociogram is created in partnership with the interested person, in an environment of empathetic confidence. The use of questions is the major method, but one must avoid that this quest for information becomes an inquest. Everything should take place in a climate of comprehensive empathy where the person is first of all informed of the objectives and the process of this approach and is convinced that the nurse is there to help.

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