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A sociometric approach to university teaching—creating group cohesion and a safe learning climate with action methods

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to explore a sociometric approach to university teaching based on evaluations from students. There are some studies of the application of action methods in university settings focused on teaching skills (see for instance Maya & Maraver, 2020); however, to our knowledge, there are no studies of sociometric approaches to promote group cohesion (GC) and a safe learning climate (SLC) in higher education. To help bridge this knowledge gap, this paper will review the relevant literature and examine evaluations from university students to explore how sociometric techniques may help establish new social connections, and promote self-disclosure, trust, and cohesion. Participants reported that the action methods provided clear structure and frames, which empowered them to stretch their comfort zone but also sparked the formation of numerous new relationships—which some called ‘speed-friendshipping’. Participants experienced increased GC and a feeling of safety regarding future lecture situations. Some participants experienced challenges related to the sociometric exercises, such as too much play and ‘drama activities’. The overall aim of this article is to broaden our understanding of how a sociometric approach may contribute to promote social relationships, GC and facilitate the establishment of an SLC.

Keywords: Sociometry, action methods, university teaching, psychological safety, safe learning climate and group cohesion

1. Introduction

This article discusses the use of sociometry to promote GC and an SLC among first-year psychology students. Sociometry is considered a core technique within the field of action methods and Morenian philosophy (Cruz, Sales, Alves, & Moita, 2018). This paper does not entail a full-scale sociometric test, but includes a variety of sociometric action techniques, such as spectrograms. We argue that it is essential to keep in mind its core theoretical foundation and discuss how it influences the way the techniques are practiced (Orkibi & Feniger-Schaal, 2019). In Morenian philosophy, authentic encounters between people are considered crucial to develop GC (Cohen, 2020). This philosophical base provided a foundation for the exercises that are explored in this article.

1.1 Sociometry, psychodrama and action methods in educational settings

Sociometry is frequently used in educational environments to map and improve social relations among students (Fotopoulou, Zafeiropoulos, & Alegre, 2019); moreover, the use of action methods in education is increasing (Maya & Maraver, 2020). Many studies in this field largely focus on the application of psychodramatic techniques as a teaching strategy or to drill specific skills (Azoulay & Orkibi, 2018; Dogan, 2010; Dutton, 2017; Gladhus & Grov, 2011; Gstrein, 2019; Maya & Maraver, 2020; ter Avest, 2017; Testoni et al., 2018). Several studies have been conducted on the application of Morenian techniques in university settings related to the learning environment; some studies have examined how psychodrama may be applied to improve psychological well-being among students (Karatas, 2014; Kaya & Deniz,

2020; Orkibi & Feniger-Schaal, 2019), to promote self-disclosure in groups of students (Çam, 2015; Ciepliński & Karkut-Rzondtkowska, 2019), and to facilitate cohesion (Giacomucci, 2020b; Mazón et al., 2018). In a study of Korean college students, psychodrama was found to promote close and positive interpersonal relationships and attachment to others (Chae & Kim, 2016). Experiential learning is an active element in action-oriented approaches to teaching, and is found to be a powerful tool (ter Avest, 2017). Maya and Maraver (2020) argue that more research is needed on evidence-based teaching practices, specifically directed toward creating GC. Dogan (2018) explored psychodrama as a means to develop and strengthen communication skills, empathy and self-awareness in future professional roles among students in educational settings. His study was included in a recent World Health Organization report (Fancourt & Finn, 2019), which gives a scoping review of the role of the arts in improving health and well-being. Studies of psychodrama in university settings are at a nascent stage, however, and to our knowledge there are no studies of sociometric techniques as a means to promote GC and an SLC in higher education.

1.2 First year at university in Norway: A period of transition

The first year of university studies can be stressful, and dropout rates are high—some European studies report between a 30–40% dropout rate between the first and second year of higher education (Onarheim & Lofquist, 2019). Social integration and interpersonal relationships were found to be important buffers against student departure (Eckles & Stradley, 2012), pointing to the importance of creating safe and cohesive student groups. In a Norwegian study on student health, students reported increasing levels of psychological distress (i.e., anxiety and depression) in their first year (Knapstad et al., 2019). Another Norwegian study on challenges related to the transition to higher education found that group psychodrama reduced stress and enhanced social network opportunities among first-year students (Onarheim & Lofquist, 2019). In the Norwegian context, entering university might be understood as leaving a small class and entering a large auditorium. Student responses to entering this new environment often differ, ranging from excitement to fear of failure. Here, social interaction plays a key role, as it is typically characterized by a strong desire to be accepted coupled with a fear of rejection. At Norwegian universities the celebration of this transition range from formal immatriculation ceremonies at the university to week-long rites de passage led by senior students.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1 Morenian theory

Moreno developed a triadic system consisting of psychodrama, group psychotherapy and sociometry. While these three methods should be understood as a whole and not separated from each other (Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rutzel, 2000, p. 84), one may be applied more prominently, depending on the group. When we use the term ‘sociometric-oriented approach to university teaching’ in this article, we refer to the general Morenian philosophical and methodological thinking that includes the triadic system, specifically sociometry: i.e., interpersonal relationships, encounters in groups and sociometric exercises. Spontaneity in interpersonal relationships is central to Morenian philosophy, and “involves an authentic willingness to engage others directly and to deeply consider their viewpoints” (Blatner & Cukier, 2007). This concept of spontaneity (Moreno, 1972/1994) is complex, and includes the ability to respond adequately to new situations and learn new responses to old situations (Blatner & Cukier, 2007, p. 295). Indeed, “spontaneity is a mixture of attitude, ability, and behavior, a readiness to improvise, to re-create as needed, responding to the needs of the moment” (Blatner & Cukier, 2007, p. 294).

2.2 Sociometry

Sociometry is about understanding, exploring and strengthening social structures and social relations in a group or a community. It also encompasses the processes of how people consciously and unconsciously choose each other (or not) through verbal and/or non-verbal actions and utterances in different group constellations (Kristoffersen, 2017; J.L. Moreno, 1953/1993). Moreno described sociometry as “a sociology of the microscopic dynamic events, regardless of the size of the social group to which it is applied” (Moreno, 1953/1993, p. 20). Cruz et al. (2018) point to the challenges concerning the conceptual diversity of the term sociometry, likely reflecting the importance and comprehensiveness it has assumed over time.

Tele is Moreno’s term for “what is measured by sociometry, those patterns of reciprocated interpersonal preference” (Blatner & Cukier, 2007, p. 297). According to Moreno (2006, pp. 291-292), tele is “the cement which bonds people together” and a bond based on mutual recognition of the other person, which influences the cohesion or lack of cohesion in a group (Moreno, 2006, p. 293). Cohen (2020) argues that tele relations may overlap with I-Thou meetings introduced in Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue, in that tele relations consist of an intersubjective and authentic encounter with the other and assume that selfhood can be revealed via reciprocal meeting with another self.

Spectrograms are an example of a sociometric tool: they are demographical presentations ‘in action’ related to, for example, age, family status, background or interests (Borge, 2011, pp. 181-182; Olesen, Campbell & Gross, 2017, p.95). When a spectrogram is applied, an imaginary line is drawn on the floor by the group leader, where each end of the line represents two different aspects, and connecting two polarities (Giacomucci, 2020b; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000, pp. 134-137). Participants in the group are asked to position themselves along the line according to their individual preferences. Participants might be asked to talk about their positioning along this line, and participants in close proximity on the line may be asked to share these thoughts in dyads (Slettemark, 2004, pp. 58, 317).

Locograms are similar to spectrograms, and are used to explore categories or options ‘in action’ (Giacomucci, 2020a; Giacomucci, 2020b). The group leader divides the room according to different options, and asks the participants to move to the place that corresponds to their preference (Sternberg & Garcia, 2000, pp. 136-137). An example of a modified locogram is the world map locogram, used to explore peoples background (Giacomucci, 2020b). Another technique derived from the locogram is the *floor check*, that involves the use of written labels that designates the different choices in the room (Giacomucci, 2020a; Giacomucci, 2020b). Spectrograms, locograms and floor checks are sociometric tools that enables quick explorations of participant experiences, provides the group leader valuable information about the group, and may be used to create interpersonal ties (Giacomucci, 2020a; Giacomucci, 2020b). Finally, *sharing* in dyads or small groups is often used as part of a sociometric process, it promotes self-disclosure, the emergence of new connections and cohesion (Giacomucci, 2020b, pp. 216-218; Olesen, Campbell & Gross, 2017, p.97).

2.3 Safe learning climate

Haidari et al. (2020) define a *safe learning climate* (SLC) as a learning environment characterized by emotional and psychological safety, openness to creativity and different opinions, and absence of judgemental behaviours and bullying. A psychologically safe learning environment promotes self-disclosure, critical thinking and social relationships among students (Haidari & Karakuş, 2019). An SLC is associated with students’ engagement and improved learning results (Fernández-García, Rodríguez-Álvarez, & Viñuela-Hernández, 2020). In organizations, the importance of trust among group members is well-recognized, and involves positive expectations about others’ behaviour as well as a willingness to be vulnerable—i.e., psychological safety (A. Edmondson, 1999; A. C. Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

The establishment of an SLC is considered crucial in the phase of transition to higher education. The concept of an SLC in school settings (also called a 'safe learning environment') is inspired by studies on group/organizational climate (Haidari, Karakuş, & Koçoğlu, 2020; Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009). Moreover, shared perceptions are central to the climate concept (Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). In school settings, the broad term 'positive school climate' is used to describe norms and values that support students to feel socially and emotionally safe (Kutsyuruba, Klinger, & Hussain, 2015).

A key aspect of an SLC is the creation of a cohesive student group. *Group cohesion* (GC) was introduced to psychological research by Festinger et al., who—inspired by Lewins field theory—defines 'cohesion' as a field of forces that kept individuals in groups together (cited in Dion, 2000). Later additions to the concept focus on the processes that keep members of groups together and united, and include elements such as interpersonal attraction, belongingness, and feelings of solidarity (Dion, 2000). GC is related to several outcomes—the most important of which are group performance and the group's ability to retain its members (Greer, 2012). In a university context, creating cohesion among classmates may foster learning and prevent student departure (Eckles & Stradley, 2012).

3. Methodology, context and subjects

3.1 Aims and scope

This article aims to explore the use of sociometric techniques and how they may affect social relationships and GC among new university students. The focus is on students' experiences participating in a seminar that applied sociometric-oriented exercises. The research question was: *How do students experience their participation in a start-up seminar that applied sociometric-oriented exercises?*

The purpose was to explore the experiential dimension of the students based on their written evaluation of the seminar. Furthermore, one aim was to better understand how participation in such a seminar may promote an SLC and GC among first-year university students before starting to attend their lectures.

3.2 The context: The start-up seminar based on sociometric-oriented approach

The start-up seminar was organized as a two-day seminar for first-year psychology students, intended to facilitate the transition to become a university student. It took place at a hotel, and the structure of the seminar was intensive, with organized activities from 10am until 9pm on the first day, and from 9am until 4pm on the second day. The seminar was led by the second author of this article, who teaches in the bachelor's programme in psychology and is a psychodrama leader. The overall topic of the seminar was 'getting to know each other', introducing the students to psychology and creating an SLC. At the beginning of the seminar, the leader provided a rationale for the exercises, explaining the importance of social relationships as a foundation for learning and how the exercises were connected to psychology.

Activities during the seminar included several sociometric exercises and drama games aimed at helping the students get to know one another and creating an SLC. In the first session, students were invited to a sharing exercise in dyads promoting self-disclosure, and other exercises on 'getting to know each other'. For example, the exercise related to self-disclosure both centred on trusting a stranger, telling a secret, and being trusted. The latter included several sociometric techniques. Spectrograms were used to map; age (year of birth), names (first letter of name aligned alphabetically), number of siblings (only child – many siblings), birthday month (January – December) and personality dimensions (e.g. introversion – extroversion). Locograms were used to assess place of birth using a map locogram, and floor checks were used to explore former knowledge and curiosity of psychological topics (e.g. memory, cooperation, love, schizophrenia, emotions, friendship,

therapy, happiness). Thereafter, there were a session with exercises on sharing experiences in dyads and small groups, exploring the motivation to study psychology and finding things in common. Throughout the seminar, students continually changed groups and partners, aiming to 'break the ice' and let students meet as many others as possible. In addition to the seminar programme which focused on building relationships, the seminar also included an introduction to psychology and sessions on student health and study techniques. Finally, there was a closing session, focused on students' goals, ambitions and hopes for the bachelor's programme, and reflections on their experiences during the seminar.

3.3 Participants

The participants were students at the start-up of a bachelor's programme in psychology. For the majority of the students, this was their first year in higher education. There were 90 and 120 participants in the two seminars, respectively. The majority were 19–21 years of age; about 70% were female and 30% were male, and most had a Norwegian background. For the majority of the students, this was their first year in higher education.

3.4 Data collection: the evaluation questionnaire

The data were not primarily collected for research purposes, but were aimed at improving the quality of the educational programme. An evaluation questionnaire was distributed online following the seminar in 2010 (42 out of 90 participants answered) and in 2015 (50 out of 120 participants answered). The evaluation included three open-ended questions: 1) What was the best thing about the start-up seminar? 2) How can the start-up seminar be improved? 3) Do you have any other comments? The analysis focused on students' written answers to these questions, 14 pages in total. The material from the two seminars were analysed together. The "other comments" question provided little relevant information, so the analysis mainly focused on the first two questions.

4. Analytic strategy

The analysis of the evaluations was inspired by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We (both the authors) independently read through the evaluations several times, took notes, and searched for and highlighted emerging themes. Next, we compared and discussed the identified themes, and reached agreement on those that were most prevalent. We took an inductive approach in the analysis, and a data-driven approach in our search for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83); our interest in social relations, sociometry and SLCs have influenced us in this process. The quotes presented below illustrate the themes that emerged from the data. They have been translated from Norwegian.

5. Findings: participants' experiences

Overall, findings indicate that the participants were largely content with the start-up seminar. We identified three primary themes regarding what the participants felt were the best aspects of the seminar: 1) getting to know each other, 2) GC and 3) safety regarding future lecture situations. The following themes also emerged: a) social aspects, b) self-disclosure and c) psychology as an academic subject. Moreover, we identified two primary themes regarding what the participants felt could be improved: 1) fewer drama games, and 2) more of a focus on psychology as an academic subject. Many participants reported that the drama games worked well as an icebreaker, but that there were too many games and they were too intensive.

5.1 'Speed-friendshipping': getting to know other class-mates

Here, the general finding was that the participants appreciated getting to know the other students. Indeed, they highlighted this as the best aspect of the seminar, as this quote illustrates:

The best thing about the start-up seminar for me was getting to know my classmates through fun and educational activities... it made it a lot easier to get to know people fast.

Others underlined the building of social relations in the seminar, a meeting place, and that they were challenged to make as many new acquaintances as possible. Several participants highlighted the importance of this abundance of new relationships:

The seminar leaders encouraged us to often change partners, and then talk to somebody that we hadn't talked to before. This made me get to know a lot of others, and I feel that there are many people I can sit next to during lectures.

The last part of this quote indicates that it might be easier for this student in a future lecture situation to *choose* to sit next to someone he or she met through the 'getting to know each other' activities. However, some valued the opportunity to meet others in an informal atmosphere:

You were very good at getting people to talk to strangers, while avoiding creating an uncomfortable or awkward atmosphere, that you may experience in such get to know each other activities.

Several participants noted that they got to know many others quite rapidly, some even calling this 'speed-friendshipping'. The quotes indicate that the seminar was successful in establishing social relations among the students.

An overall aim of the seminar was to promote self-disclosure and openness among the students. The participants seemed to appreciate getting closer to the other students, as we see in this quote:

I liked the opportunity to really break the ice with the people who will be my fellow classmates.

Some mentioned that they felt the exercises helped build a culture of openness:

To establish a culture within the class, where people are open and motivated to talk to others, and get to know everybody.

Other participants also stressed that they wanted to make this experience last, and had an understanding that maintaining an open culture would require effort on their part. Another participant appreciated the ease of entering new encounters:

The best thing about the start-up seminar was how the class environment opened up, and how easily you could start countless new conversations. I think the reason for this was the exercises we did.

In this final quote, the participant explicitly linked the sociometric exercises to constructing a culture of openness. Overall, it seemed the participants generally appreciated the encounters, and felt that it laid the foundation for a common sense of belonging.

5.2 Cohesion and unity

The seminar's creation of a strong GC and a feeling of unity was frequently mentioned:

The best experience was the cohesion and the fact that most of us had the chance to talk to each other.

Some mentioned a change in their experience of the group, from a large crowd of people to a tightly knit group:

The best thing about the seminar was the change the group went through, from being a large crowd where you just know a few people to becoming a tightly knit group where you recognise several people. Not least, that you become more open to new encounters, and less nervous about how to make new friends in the time yet to come.

Some participants also noticed a corresponding positive development during the seminar, both regarding the feeling of unity, but also related to feeling less anxious and more secure;

moreover, some mentioned that because they did things together throughout the entire day, GC was strengthened.

5.3 Safety regarding future lecture situations and well-being

Safety regarding future lecture situations at the university emerged as a theme in several responses, as shown in this quote:

The start-up seminar has made me prepared to enter a lecture hall and feel safe.

Others highlighted that the seminar created numerous new acquaintances and that they did not have to worry about being alone during lectures. Somewhat related to trust was a feeling of well-being, as illustrated by this comment about spending time together during the seminar:

The trip was very pleasant, and very important for future thriving.

One participant described how they experienced the learning environment:

It is nice to arrange a seminar like this to create a good environment among us students.

Trust in others provides a foundation from which a climate of psychological safety can develop. Although this climate may require constant attention, the start-up seminar seemed to succeed in at least instigating a supportive learning environment. It should be noted that 'the social aspects' were mentioned as positive by several participants, but without further elaboration. Since this is a broad term that can encompass many different aspects—including students' leisure time, sharing rooms and eating together during the seminar—we have not emphasized this theme.

5.4 Improvements and challenges—fewer drama games

With regard to participants' suggestions for improving the seminar, the primary themes were fewer drama games and increased focus on psychology as an academic subject, as illustrated by this quote:

More psychology and less drama games.

Some participants felt that the exercises were challenging:

I was completely new, and it was difficult to let go of all inhibitions and scream like a three-year old together with complete strangers. During the disclosure task, we also had to share our own experiences, but it is a bit easier in smaller groups.

In this quote, the participant seemed uncomfortable doing exercises in plenary sessions, but felt safer in small groups. Some participants reported feeling generally uncomfortable during the seminar, and that it did not meet their expectations:

Too much 'play'. It made me feel forced and uncomfortable... I thought it was fun, but after a while I thought that perhaps this would be more suitable to drama rather than psychology students. It was a nice way to loosen up the atmosphere, kind of like an icebreaker, but as the day went by I felt there were too many games.

As the above quote illustrates, it seemed that some participants interpreted the sociometric exercises as 'games', and did not experience them as relevant. This varied, however, and some participants highlighted that 'several of the games were relevant to the subject matter', and that 'theory and practice were interconnected in the seminar'.

To summarize, the participants' responses indicate that the seminar succeeded in creating relationships and building trust, and provided space for the creation of an SLC.

6. Discussion

The findings illustrate that sociometric exercises and drama games may spark new insights and relationships. The techniques are powerful, and these kinds of experiences—even if brief—may facilitate an SLC. For example, in the exercises in the seminar, the experiences related to self-disclosure gave rise to participant reflection on how sharing personal

experiences may help construct social relationships; this is in line with ter Avest's (2017) findings. Haidari and Karakuş (2019) link self-disclosure to the establishment of a psychologically SLC—suggesting that sociometric techniques may foster academic learning.

Participants experienced some exercises as facilitating 'speed-friendshipping', resulting in numerous new acquaintances. Furthermore, the participants experienced increased cohesion and unity following the seminar: factors found to prevent student departure (Eckles & Stradley, 2012). In this way, the seminar may have lowered the threshold for approaching other students at school, thus helping participants continue to build social relationships. Moreover, participants' awareness regarding the necessity of active participation in the development of social relationships—e.g., through social activities, involvement, initiatives and responses—seems to have been cultivated.

Findings also show the early establishment of social relationships in the student group. Indeed, and relating to Morenian theory, some of the participants' accounts of their encounters with other students may be a sign of the social effect of the early beginning of a tele bond (Moreno, 1953/1993, p. 162). In future studies, it would be interesting to examine whether a start-up seminar spurs independent continuation of developing social relationships in other social situations, inside and outside the university context.

6.1 Action-oriented participation in the seminar

The kinds of play, games and exercises applied in the start-up seminar may be understood as forms of performance (Schechner, 2013). The students participated verbally and/or physically, in continually shifting observer and actor positions: entering into observing positions when they listened to others in different exercises and games, and actor and positions when they shared about themselves (dimensions of self-disclosure). In this reciprocal actor–observer relationship facilitated by the exercises, participation and involvement were activated on various levels (embodied, cognitively, emotionally, personally, socially and verbally), within and between the participants in the different encounters. This may relate to Morenian spontaneity theory regarding new and adequate responses, attitudes and behaviours in new or old situations (Blatner & Cukier, 2007, p. 295), and how the principle of spontaneity is activated in interpersonal relationships through the ideal of the encounters (Blatner & Cukier, 2007, p. 295). The students had to engage each other directly and listen to the others' reflections. In this way, aspects of applied spontaneity were actualized through the encounters and interpersonal meetings between the students, and a readiness to improvise and re-create as needed was potentially instilled.

6.2 Tension: too many games—many new relations

In the evaluations we found the tension between what emerged as the best aspect of the seminar (*getting to know each other*) and what they felt could be improved (*fewer drama games*) particularly interesting. Many participants emphasized that they appreciated getting to know many other students and making new acquaintances from participating in the seminar. Much of this development of interpersonal relationships happened through sociometric exercises and drama games. However, the finding that participants wanted fewer drama games and an increased focus on psychology as a professional subject was significant. This could reflect a lack of experienced connection between the games, sociometric exercises and psychology as an academic subject—something that could possibly lead to decreased motivation toward involvement in the exercises. In analysing the responses and trying to take an outsider perspective, it seemed clear that the exercises, games and 'getting to know each other' activities were interrelated and relevant to the subject of psychology—however, from the participants' perspectives, this link sometimes seems less obvious. The participants' tendency to question the relevance became more prominent after the initial phase of the seminar. One explanation is that the exercises challenged participants' expectations as first-year students in the bachelor's programme in psychology: framing the exercises as something related to psychological topics seemed to

promote motivation and engagement among them. The practical implication of this is a recommendation to university teachers to frame sociometric exercises toward the subject matter, and not as ‘getting to know each other’ activities *per se*.

Notably, one participant mentioned how social psychology was incorporated and conducted in practice and in action during some of the ‘getting to know each other’ games that focused on opening up, telling about their first impression, and saying things they normally would not tell strangers. From this, we suggest that aspects of social psychology were undertaken *in action* on the floor and through involved participation that engaged the students on several levels. Kristoffersen (2018) makes a distinction between cold sociometry, characterized by numerical rankings depicted in a sociogram, and *living sociometry*, dynamic encounters between people portrayed live at the floor: In relation to this, it is tempting to propose cold social psychology and living social psychology as a topic for discussion in similar groups with an action-oriented approach, and ask participants to discuss how lectures versus practical exercises influence their learning process.

Furthermore, some participants experienced that the sociometric techniques entailed too much action. The importance of creating a safe group space, and the group leader’s responsibility in balancing the needs of the individuals in the group—e.g., taking into account the mixture of introverted and extroverted personalities—should not be underestimated. On the one hand, it is important that the group leader initiates sociometric exercises that challenge the students’ comfort zones, as this enables spontaneous actions that promote interpersonal encounters, social interactions and new relationships among the students. On the other hand, this must be balanced with the needs of the individuals in the group. Introducing action methods and sociometric exercises to a student start-up seminar requires awareness around responsiveness and sensitivity to participants’ reactions, and taking care not to surpass the threshold of trust and safety, which is in line with Giacomucci (2020b). Ciepliński and Karkut-Rzondtkowska (2019, p. 163) advocate that the application of action methods in university settings necessitates awareness of the psychological power of the techniques, which also entails an ethical responsibility on the part of the leader.

6.3 Culture of openness, participation and co-responsibility

Some participants found that the exercises helped create a culture of openness within the student group, and assumed that maintaining this culture would require some kind of *effort on their part*. This might indicate that the exercises helped stimulate awareness and self-reflection around the necessity of one’s own active contributions regarding developing the norms and culture of their student group. This, in turn, could cultivate a feeling of responsibility for the co-creation of the culture and norms, which furthermore is hypothesized to influence the learning climate in a positive way.

The participants’ burgeoning awareness regarding active participation in experiential learning and action methods could be interpreted as an indication of enhanced co-responsibility: specifically, that of being an active, involved and engaged student citizen in a student community. Nicholson links applied theatre to citizenship, and argues that citizenship, in addition to legal rights and obligations, is also “a more fluid and pliable set of social practices” (Nicholson, 2005, p. 27), in line with Moreno’s vision of sociometry (Moreno, 1953/1993). Nicholson draws on a sociological perspective to understand social practices as indicating the dynamic social construction of citizenship; moreover, she argues that viewing citizenship as a social practice lends it relevance to more ordinary and everyday activities of life. The student groups in our study can be interpreted as a society in miniature, where the responsibility for co-creating social practices and relations is an essential part of being a democratic citizen in the student community. This is in line not just with Nicholson’s theory, but also with Kristoffersen’s (2017, 2018) linking of sociometry with participation, democracy and democratic formation.

6.4 Limitations

While the participants' accounts are encouraging in that they point to positive effects of the sociometric techniques, some limitations should be noted. The questionnaire was based on evaluation schemes of a seminar and lacked depth, therefore future studies are advised to include questions that explore more specifically the relationship between sociometric techniques, GC and an SLC. The fact that the group leader is also the second author of this paper can also be critiqued. However, we argue that including an author who was not a part of the start-up seminar strengthens the validity of the findings. That two start-up seminars (in 2010 and 2015, respectively) were analysed and discussed as a whole represents another limitation. The student groups were not identical, nor were the contexts or exercises, and this might have influenced the two seminar groups differently. Furthermore, this study was conducted on the responses of first year psychology students in Norway from an evaluation questionnaire regarding the seminar, and generalizations must take the context into account. Finally, using sociometric techniques in a university setting is challenging; it is a powerful tool that may give rise to emotionally strong reactions that might feel uncomfortable in an academic context (Giacomucci, 2020b)—hence researchers in this field needs to be careful to bring closure to sensitive topics.

6.5 Future studies

There are several aspects related to the use of sociometric techniques to promote an SLC and GC that needs further exploration. First, we propose that future studies explore the effect of sociometric techniques in more detail, for instance by asking specific questions directed towards the sociometric exercises. Secondly, we propose that future studies go more into depth by conducting qualitative interviews, to further explore participants experiences. Thirdly, we propose to conduct longitudinal studies to examine how the sociometric exercises influence the learning climate throughout the first year at university. Finally, we would like to add a note of caution that researchers in this field should be careful about the specificity regarding definition and operationalization of the sociometric techniques (as suggested by Cruz, Sales, Alves, & Moita, 2018; Orkibi & Feniger-Schaal, 2019).

7. Conclusion

This article discuss students experiences of participating in a start-up seminar using sociometric-oriented exercises. It illustrates how university teachers may use action methods and sociometric techniques to promote an SLC among first-year students. Entering university involves a transition and is a vulnerable period for many students. As an institution, universities should advocate for an SLC that contributes to adjustment and well-being. Additionally, the establishment of an SLC provides the foundation for academic success for new students. Study findings indicate that the participants established new acquaintances and developed interpersonal relationships during the start-up seminar, and some participants described an enhanced experience of GC. Furthermore, students noted the promotion of an awareness regarding one's co-responsibility toward establishing a positive group culture. We hope this article will assist university teachers in their efforts to foster an SLC, promote social relations and GC in student groups. Finally, this article illustrates the importance of the establishment and strengthening of social relationships among students, and how Morenian philosophy and a sociometric-oriented approach may contribute to this endeavour.

Ethics Statement

The data in this paper were excerpted from students' evaluations, which primarily focus on developing the quality of the educational programme. It is not possible to identify students from the excerpts. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee in the Department of Psychology at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences.

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