

The Nature of Sociometry and the Sociometry of Nature

Come fly with me!! – imagine the two of us swirling around together in para-gliders. Almost being able to reach out and touch; yet at the same time being able to go our own ways. Imagine, as if we are gravity free; able to rise and fall at will on thermals and at the same time getting a birds' eye view of city-scapes and country sides. Simply hanging out together and connecting mid-air - wildly enjoying formation flying in a cohort of togetherness.

I reckon birds (while obviously very different in so many ways from us humans) might have somewhat similar sensations as they swirl through the sky and form their amazing flocking patterns. Scientists



have known for some time how starlings flock together and create cloud effects. We know how starlings make the complexly choreographed flocking shapes so fluid. The starlings work at keeping a fixed distance between each other. Birds at the centre of the flock fly around indiscriminate paths while the outer birds, congregating in ever greater

numbers, expand the periphery. At various times birds near the centre find it hard to see and are unsure where to fly. Others then take up leadership roles and as they take new direction the flock may divide into two.

Two flocks can dance around each other until miraculously they merge and become one and once again separate. Apparently starlings most like to do this as if in play and exercise in early evenings. A prelude to perching and carrying out a sing along as celebration of together-ness and settling down for the night.

A new discovery is that the birds in the flock connect through choosing via a starling's type of Sociometry. Though it is not a human sociometry; it is none-the-less a type of sociometry. The birds choose as many as seven others and make a cohort to fly together. When the flock splits the seven stay together. This sociometry criteria relates to a survival mechanism against malicious predators.

“Who Shall Survive?” - At great speed desperately hungry falcons dive down into the flocks aiming to pick off an individual. It seems there are so many densely packed starlings the falcon cannot possibly miss a kill. Will there be selfish starlings hiding behind others? Will there be some altruistic sacrificers? The haunting existential question, “Who Shall Survive?” is one the starlings must answer in a split second.

The Nature of Sociometry and the Sociometry of Nature

Their response is surprising! They maintain their sociometric cohort and as the flock divides no one starling need remain isolated.

It seems they conjecture, 'will we each succumb to fear or shall we



continue enjoying our formation flying together-ness?' 'Are we orientated towards joy and love of flying together, or threat and anxiety?' Besides the quick evasive action of the starlings, the action of seven starlings evading as one, confuses the

falcon. Choosing between sets of seven starlings going in different directions muddles a falcon targeting any one starling in particular.

It seems sociometry [making a criterion for choosing reciprocal relations] is in starlings' nature and embedded into sentient nature. As the falcon descends on the flock the starlings create a hole in the flock and the falcon flies right through - missing a catch. A social rule is evidenced. 'If your seven's group sociometry is strong and powerfully connected to the whole society; then you, your sub-group and the whole society is likely to remain more spontaneous and readily survive'.

Simply hanging out together and wildly enjoying formation flying in a cohort of seven starlings and maintaining relations to lots of other cohorts and the flock as a whole, increases ecological equilibrium and diversity and resilience. Group sociometry enhances systems longevity and who-shall-survive-ness of the species. And connecting when cohort formation flying is awesome fun!



I refreshed my insights into the nature of human sociometry, as making criterion for choosing who to move towards or away from [reciprocal relations], as I watched 'Conquest of the Skies'; the recent documentary on the rise of birds and advantages of flight in species evolution by David Attenborough. Despite our species ontological difference, our criterion of sociometric choice as to, 'who to spread our wings and fly with', meant we have something in common. The beauty in the starling's aerodynamic, skywards black organic clouds contrasting greatly with Rome's static rectangular cityscape was self-evident. In choosing where I live – who have I chosen to flock with? I imagined the beauty in the pattern of my own and other's sociometry more clearly and checked its relation to us humans surviving – thriving.

Brendan Cartmel