

Early Recollections: An Adlerian Technique With Older People

By: [Thomas J. Sweeny, PhD, CRC](#) and [Jane E. Myers, PhD, CRC, NCC](#)

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Abstract:

Research on the success of life review therapy with older persons has been equivocal. This article suggests a related but less time consuming and possibly more productive alternative for facilitating ego integrity in late maturity. The Adlerian concept of Early Recollections is discussed in detail, with concrete suggestions for therapy and examples provided.

Article:

Merriam and Cross (1982, p. 39) noted that "reminiscence, or recalling the past, is a behavior common to all ages." It is viewed as particularly important for older persons as they attempt the universal process of achieving ego integrity (Coleman, 1974; Erikson, 1950). Though not a new concept, study of reminiscence in older persons has accelerated over the past two decades as growing numbers of older people have stimulated increasing interest in gerontology. Butler's (1963) research on the role of the life review among older individuals was the starting point and remains the focal point of much research and clinical practice using reminiscence. Unfortunately, research on the effectiveness of this technique has yielded equivocal results (Perotta & Meacham, 1981).

Though the need for some type of reminiscing experience is well documented, the nature of this experience also remains unclear. Life review needs better definition of process, methods and caregiver qualifications. An alternative method to assist older persons in achieving ego integrity, as well as to help them live more satisfying and effective lives on a daily basis, is described in the following sections. Based on Adlerian theory, the technique of using Early Recollections provides an opportunity for structured reminiscence and offers several advantages over the traditional life review therapy. The description of this approach and one of the major techniques of particular relevance to older persons comprises the remainder of this article.

ADLERIAN THEORY AND TECHNIQUES

The work of Alfred Adler is well-known to most students of psychology and counseling, and chapters describing Adler's theories and techniques along with research on the efficacy of these techniques may be found in basic textbooks in the field. Because of the relative volume and easy accessibility of the literature, the basics of Adler's theory of Individual Psychology are not described here. Rather, various aspects of Adler's ideas are interwoven in a discussion of the technique of life style assessment, which is presented with examples as an alternative to life review with older persons. Research on the efficacy of this technique may be found in several of the re-sources listed in the references (see Baruth & Eckstein, 1978; Eckstein, Baruth & Mahrer, 1978).

Life Style Assessment

Life style assessment is a method of uncovering the unique way an individual solves the business of life (Dreikurs, 1954; Mosak, 1958; Sweeney, 1981). How one copes with any life tasks including aging is within the scope of study for this method. Long used by Adlerians as a method both for clinical assessment and treatment, it is still relatively unknown among practitioners in general.

Life styles are composed of thoughts, perceptions and attitudes which guide persons in managing life. These characteristic styles are developed and fairly well set early in life, i.e., approximately eight years of age.

Examples of adult models in solving conflict, making decisions, child rearing practices, and values toward work, friendship, love and spiritual development are discovered by the counselor through reports of early life perceptions.

Family constellation, much studied and written about even in popular magazines, is useful when understood in the context of Individual Psychology (Sweeney, 1981). The psychological position in one's family influences basic ways of approaching our life tasks. For example, oldest children tend to adopt the attitudes and values of the parents while the classic middle child of a family of three will strive to be different in at least some attitudes and behavior. Based upon clinical experience, certain general observations such as these have been helpful in establishing rapport quickly and in formulating working hypotheses for effective interventions.

General characteristics of the sibling positions are considered as nomothetic in nature, or according to what they have in common. However, these characteristics also are useful in discerning how an oldest, second, middle, youngest or only child is unique by differing in certain respects from other persons of like family position. For example, oldest children often find their place in the family and in life by being responsible, conforming, and generally getting along well with the older generation. When an individual who grew up in the "oldest child" position does not have these characteristics, the Adlerian immediately begins to wonder what life circumstances have contributed to this person being different. Learning to think in these ways helps the counselor to understand idiographic ways of thinking, perceiving, and behaving which distinguish one person from another even within the same family.

Because life style assessment requires more explanation than space permits, this discussion is limited to some of the key concepts and one major technique of this method which holds much promise for use in counseling older persons. The major concepts that are important for understanding and using this technique include the following:

1. Behavior is purposive, i.e., we act to achieve goals which we believe are important to us in solving the process of living.
2. Behavior is best understood in a social context, i.e., persons strive to be "somebody" in relation to everyone else, to make their place. If we observe behavior and listen for the private logic in how others expect to achieve their places, then we will be able to anticipate future responses to related life tasks.
3. Behavior is understood best in a holistic context, i.e., all thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and values are an expression of an underlying theme of how individuals make their place. The influence of body, family, environment, etc. all are important influences, but none is more significant than the selective meaning persons give to their experiences.
4. Each person creates a private logic as to how to cope with life. This perspective does not change over time so long as it goes unexamined or the person continues to believe that it is useful in meeting life's demands.
5. Memory of early childhood experiences is selective and serves the function of helping us to be unconsciously guided by "rules" about life, ourselves and other people.

Without going into great detail, we can observe that this is a point of view which is fundamentally positive in outlook. The position that individuals create their own rules about life, themselves and others which are useful to them in coping with life situations, provides for the value of self-examination at any point regardless of one's age. Equally important, the avenue for examining the meaning that we have given to life is readily available in one of the past-times of many older persons—reminiscing.

Courage to Cope and Grow

Encouragement is used by Adlerians as the central concept to bring about change. Courage to be imperfect, courage to forgive oneself and others, courage to act even when one is very afraid, courage to do that which is no longer easy, courage to make the very best of whatever situation develops, are the basis for counseling. Adler believed that feelings of inferiority were a part of the human condition. How we cope with these feelings of inadequacy is reflected in our approach to life.

The counselor can diagnose the degree of discouragement by the prevalence and persistence of reports of fears, excuses, complaining, blaming, criticizing, and disability. Some persons would contend that such behaviors are "normal" for "old" people. While aging does indeed bring many challenges, and any person who loses a loved one, for example, will experience grief and all of its ramifications, it is still a matter of degree as to how well different individuals handle similar situations.

These differences can be uncovered through the use of early recollections. Adler noted, "Thus his memories represent his (Story of My Life); a story he repeats to himself to warn him or to comfort him, to keep him concentrated on his goal, to prepare him, by means of past experiences, to meet the future with an already tested style of action" (Adler, 1958, p. 73). The following recollection of a widow age 67, Ms. Sullivan, helps to illustrate the richness of information which even one recollection holds. At the age of five:

I recall my mother getting ready to set out on our front porch, some of my dresses that were old and no longer fit. One of the dresses was my *very* favorite. I can remember my grandmother at the top of the stairs, my mother walking halfway down the stairs, and I was at the bottom of the stairs. I was begging my mother not to give away my favorite dress. She was telling me to stop making a fuss and being so silly and my grandmother was saying soothing things to me. I hated both my grandmother and mother at the same time; my mother for giving away the dress and saying I was silly, and my grandmother for trying to make me feel better about the situation.

This woman provides us the opportunity to hypothesize about her outlook on life, herself and other women. As a matter of practice, we also ask that a counselee report the feelings associated with such an experience. In this case, she noted:

I was angry at mother and grandmother. I felt I was a baby and kept telling myself as I cried, to stop and be intelligent about all this. If I act like a baby my mother will really not take me serious. I also was angry at my grandmother because I felt I did not need to be taken care of.

This particular woman had lost her husband the year before due to an unexpected heart attack. She had appeared to have coped quite satisfactorily but was urged by her daughter who lived in an adjacent state to sell her home and move into a senior citizens' apartment complex. She agreed to this arrangement at the time but never seemed entirely accepting of it. The woman who was administrator of the apartment complex made friendly overtures to Ms. Sullivan but without much success; Ms. Sullivan was cordial but distant toward the administrator.

For someone not trained in Adlerian methods or aware of the implications of early recollections, such a report may seem interesting but inconsequential. In point of fact, when Ms. Sullivan was given the opportunity to discuss its meaning for her, she reported that it helped her rethink her position on some matters of much importance to her. Certain of the insights also would be important to anyone attempting to help her cope with loss, grief, and relationships with other women in her later years.

As time went on, other residents who came to know Ms. Sullivan expressed concern about the strong angry feelings which she had toward her daughter. Her son lived in California and was seen only at the time of the funeral for his father. The daughter had made more than a few efforts to visit her mother but seemed to have stopped trying of late. Those closest to her found it difficult to confront her because she would say something

like, "don't be silly, I can take care of myself just fine!" Nevertheless, these folks did not believe that she was adapting well to her "new" circumstances.

Because of persistent headaches, Ms. Sullivan sought a prescription from her physician. Fortunately, he had known her for several years and recognized signs of depression during his time with her. At his insistence, she agreed to have a "couple of sessions to help her sort out her feelings and priorities now that she's a widow." Before developing this case further, we will provide additional guidelines on the collection and interpretation of early recollections.

Obtaining and Interpreting Early Recollections

As a general rule, early recollections (ER's) are not difficult to obtain. We simply introduce the idea as a useful and interesting way to come to know a person. The idea that early life experiences are important to our later development seems quite reasonable to most counsees. In addition, persons of all ages enjoy telling their "stories."

One matter which requires clear understanding concerns the definition of an early recollection as opposed to a report. A report is sometimes confused with an ER. Not infrequently, persons will recall activities which occurred regularly in their younger years. For example, "we used to go for ice cream after church on Sunday and that was always a fun time." Compared with, "I remember one Sunday when we went to get our ice cream, mine fell on the sidewalk just as I stepped outside. I felt terrible but my Dad took me right back in to get another one. I felt really good when I saw that the new cone was even bigger than the first and it tasted good, too!" The specificity and vividness is quite different in these examples.

Another consideration relates to the detail remembered. When copying what is being recalled, record as faithfully as possible what is said, verbatim. The descriptors used to characterize self and others can be revealing. Comments such as, "he was always the responsible one," "she was always the playful one," can lead you to wondering what the counslee characterizes herself as "always" being. Sometimes an individual will not be sure that a recalled event "really happened." If it meets the other criteria for an ER, whether it happened or not is unimportant. It still has special meaning for the individual.

In addition, the presence or absence of others, action or reaction to events, colors, texture, positive or negative circumstances, etc., all become a part of the material used in coming to understand the significance of nuance in the individuals' way of expressing themselves (Sweeney, 1981). Usually we can validate artistic inclinations' when ER's include color. This does not mean talent *per se* but at least appreciation or interest in art, etc. Naturally, there are many variations on this way of seeking meaning in the eye of the beholder; it is one of the creative aspects of counseling. In all cases, we use observed behavior, self-report, and standardized testing as well as other methods to cross-check and validate our observations.

The affect expressed in conjunction with the ER's is always important. The feelings reveal the meaning attributed to the events. It is in these comments that courage is revealed as present or not. Life is seen as fair or unfair, safe or unsafe. Life tasks are accepted as challenges to be met or avoided. Others are seen as helpful or threatening. They perceive themselves as able or not able.

Two individuals from the same family having experienced the same event will assign different meaning to its significance. These perceptions of what happened and how they felt about it become our basis for understanding their "private logic." When we find discouraged attitudes and feelings in one's ER's, it is not surprising to find evidence of it popping up in their day-to-day lives. Normally this reveals itself when the individual's typical way of perceiving and coping is ineffective or otherwise inappropriate for the present circumstances. Certainly, loss of one's spouse, friends, family, home or slowing down or loss of physical faculties will bring on a test of one's ability to cope and grow in the light of new circumstances.

The greatest prejudice discouraged persons hold against anyone, is the one they hold against themselves. To not believe in oneself is a terrible thing. Mahatma Gandhi said: "Courage is the one sure foundation of character. Without courage there can be no morality, no religion, no love. One cannot follow truth or love so long as one is subject to fear" (Nehru, 1958, p.i.).

A life lived in fear is no life at all. Our challenge, therefore, is to confront in a caring way the mistaken meaning assigned to such early events as they present themselves in the here-and-now living of today. The process of growing, stretching and risking is approached with a new enthusiasm, new insight and new energy under the guidance of someone who cares too much to allow individuals to live out their lives in low risk and full of fear. ER's provide avenues for growth and help to overcome discouraged attitudes in older persons.

THE CASE OF MS. SULLIVAN

A few observations about the case of Ms. Sullivan can help to illustrate the practical usefulness of early recollections in counseling with older persons. First, even without using other life style or ER data, we could guess that Ms. Sullivan may have difficulty with a woman counselor, unless the counselor was trained in life style methods. This is based on her reaction to her mother and grandmother in the ER and the perception of her mother being above her. This was corroborated at least in part by the female administrator's experience (potentially an authority figure) in attempting to befriend Ms. Sullivan. Also interesting to note is that she accepted her male physician's advice, rebuffed the woman acquaintances who offered similar advice based on their experience, and seemed unusually hard on her daughter who tried to make at least some visits. On the other hand, her son was not known to even make an effort to come for a visit and her attitude toward him remained essentially positive.

Upon meeting with Ms. Sullivan, the counselor found a pleasant, articulate lady who seemed quite self-sufficient in outlook and manner. When asked how life would be different if she did not get headaches, she stated that maybe she could be a bit more sociable with other residents. She later expressed disappointment with her relationship with her daughter as well. After a period of general discussion about her husband's death, adjustments since then, relationships with other family members, and similar matters, the idea of life style was introduced to Ms. Sullivan. She agreed to using this as a means of helping the counselor to know her better.

Life style assessment involving all the data about early relationships including siblings, parents, etc. and five or six ER's were developed into a kind of verbal narrative focusing on Ms. Sullivan's way of coping with work, friendship, and love relationships. Because the process of collecting life style information lends itself to rapport building and further information about current life coping, this is a positive empathic experience for the counslee. This is also an opportunity for reflection and corroborating or refuting impressions which the counselor has begun to formulate.

What caused her stress and how she coped with it was discussed. This was a give and take, interactive process. It involved a facilitative confrontation of life issues. Ms. Sullivan acknowledged that for her, not feeling "on top" and in control of herself was very disquieting. Further, she recognized her pattern of being put off by anyone (but particularly women) who tried to "coddle" her. She was confronted by the counselor with the observation that "could it be" she was behaving toward her daughter exactly the way she had perceived her mother behaving toward her. This had never occurred to her before now. She reflected on this for some time and concluded that, indeed, she was probably more faithfully following that pattern than her mother had! The implications of this insight were discussed further.

On a subsequent visit her daughter joined her. They were both grateful for the healing which had begun in their relationship while there was still time to enjoy coming to know each other in a new way. Counseling continued periodically over time as the mother sought to resolve other feelings which contributed to unhappiness in her new living arrangement.

CONCLUSION

The use of early recollections in working with older persons has been illustrated to encourage counseling practitioners, trainers, supervisors, and researchers to explore the value of this technique. If one can see the potential for only a single ER in revealing significant insight to an individual's outlook on life, self and others, how much more will be realized with further data, counselee behavior in the interview and an opportunity to interact.

Using the other precepts of Adlerian Psychology also will increase the worth of these methods. They certainly have promise for work with older persons. No life review need end with an older person feeling depressed, defeated, or fearful without making an informed effort to confront the negative self-talk behind these feelings. The use of early recollections and life style assessment are not a panacea for all unhappy older persons. However, they can be viable alternatives or supplements to present methods.

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