

Life Style Identification and Assessment

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An individual's character is the manifestation of a plan for life which developed during childhood. The pattern of life which is formulated by age four or five is adhered to for life. Adler (1935) wrote, "Character traits are the external aspects of the relationship of an individual to the problem of the outside world, and are to be regarded as indexes to how the style of life of a certain individual will express itself in reaction to an external stimulus or to a stimulus which may even originate within himself."

Neither does the strategy of life just occur, nor does it develop from peculiarities or isolated experiences. The scheme for living emerges by repetition of the difficulties an individual encounters in the family which is the first group in which he attempts to find a place. Later the social environment plays an equally vital role in establishing the life plan. "Each individual will find special ways and means which appear to be serviceable for his special plan. Out of the individual's special life plan develops the life style which characterizes him and everything he does" (Dreikurs, 1953).

The individual may pursue a great variety of immediate and sometimes temporary goals with reference to his life style. Basic goals form the foundations for his personality. Immediate goals are the individual's conception of finding a place in society. They may be "fictitious" as Adler (1956) points out. The individual is not aware of his basic concepts nor his personal bias, that is, his fictitious goals. Nevertheless, his actions are congruent with the goals he has set for himself.

Although the individual is unaware of the goals he pursues, his life style may be recognized. The identification may be made by observing the individual in action, exploring the family constellation, and eliciting the early recollections.

Through direct observation it is not difficult to recognize the goals of behavior. Actions are usually in harmony with his goals (Grunwald, 1970). As Dreikurs (1957) points out, "The individual may be convinced that he does not want what he brings about, but then he is merely not aware of the objectives he sets for himself. It is more difficult to recognize his basic goals which are the foundation of his life style, the fictitious goals. They represent a scheme of action by which the individual hopes to find his place in society. A set of convictions about himself and life which underlie his social movements."

The exploration of the family constellation and the interaction of the individual with all the members of his family during early childhood permits a

clear picture of the pattern of life he has formulated. Birth order is the primary element of the family constellation clarifying an immediate impression of the grouping within the family and the position the individual occupies. His interpretation of his environment will be different if he is the first, second, middle, or youngest child, the only girl among boys, or vice versa. The individual's perception of life depends upon the interpersonal relationship between members of the family and is not exclusively dependent on the birth order. Each becomes different depending upon who among the siblings is the competitor, who is the most different in character, temperament, and interest. The individual will withdraw in the area in which the competitor succeeds. He moves in to fill the vacuum where another fails. The character traits of each child express the action he takes to find a place in the family, the interactions that take place, and the manner in which they influence each other.

The oldest, for example, generally strives to stay in first place and to push the other siblings down, especially the second born. This appears to be verified by research. Galton (1874) pointed out that first born children were over-represented among eminent men of science. Others have found a larger number of first-borns attaining better grades in high school (Schachter, 1963). Smelser and Steward (1968) concluded from their study that the finding of researchers that more first-borns attending college was not a phenomenon of birth order as such, "but instead an effect, first of all, of some interaction of birth order, sex of child, and sex of siblings." The findings of Bragg (1970) support other findings in showing that an elder sibling acts as an intellectual depressant on the later born, especially if he is of the opposite sex. Bragg postulates on the basis of his data that "if the older sibling is of the opposite sex, the second born will label academic behavior sex-role inappropriate for himself." For example, a second born male seeing his older sister studying will come to label studying as "feminine" behavior. In consequence he will attempt to select a "masculine" role which excludes or reduces such "feminine" behavior as study.

"Thus, it appears that from the moment of birth the child acts, thinks, and feels in accordance with how he experiences or perceives his world, and the way in which he perceives his world is to him reality. We must remember that it is not the position in the family sequence that is the decisive factor but how the individual interprets his position" (Pepper, 1971).

The early recollections can provide an immediate insight into the individual's life style. They indicate the convictions toward life which he has developed and maintained since childhood. The individual remembers only the incidents that are consistent with his idea of life (Mosak, 1971; Nikelly and Verger, 1971).

"Thus his memories," wrote Adler (1931), "represent his 'Story of My Life,' a story he repeats to himself to warn him or 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."

Early recollections have the advantage, as a projective technique, of being completely unstructured. The individual is asked, "How far back can you remember? Think as far back as you can and tell your earliest memory when you were a child."

Early recollections have been a subject of interest since 1899 when G. Stanley Hall wrote a paper entitled "Notes on Early Memories." Research to support life style formulations based on early recollections as reliably communicable to professional workers is comparatively recent. Purcell (1952), from his experimental study, concluded that there was a general support for Adler's views on early memories. Ferguson (1964) concluded from her investigation that it was clear "that life style formulation derived from early recollections are not just spurious idiosyncratic products of the clinician but are reliably communicable to a wide range of other professional workers, even to those whose own frame of reference is not Adlerian."

The psychologist has at his disposal three techniques for the identification and assessment of the individual's life style. Through the observation of behavior, analysis of family constellation and examination of early recollections, the clinician gains insight into the individual's intentions and can disclose his mistaken goals.

Summary

The life style is identified and assessed by investigating the individual's family constellation and by interpreting his early recollections. Birth order is the primary element of the family constellation. It presents an immediate impression of the grouping within the family and the position the individual occupies within it. His interpretation of his environment will be different if he is the first, second, middle, or youngest child, the only girl among boys, or vice versa. The individual's perception of life depends upon the interpersonal relationships between members of the family and is not exclusively dependent on birth order. Each varies depending upon whom among the siblings is the competitor, who is the most different in character, temperament, and interest. The individual will withdraw in the area in which the competitor succeeds. He moves in to fill the vacuum where another fails. The character traits of each child express the action he takes to find a place in the family, the interactions that take place, and the manner in which they influence each other.

Early recollections provide an immediate insight into the individual's life style. Another advantage is that it is the only projective technique which is completely unstructured. From the individual's early recollections one can determine the conclusions which he draws concerning his present situation. He draws from the innumerable experiences of his early childhood only those that are in harmony with his present outlook on life.

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