

Family Constellation and Lifestyle: Educational Applications

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This paper illustrates the use of the assumptions of Individual Psychology for therapeutic purposes in educational settings. Ideally, an atmosphere of mutual respect and common concern can be generated in any classroom, regardless of the subject matter. This article, however, specifically focuses on using Adlerian concepts, i.e., family constellation and lifestyle, in teaching courses that deal with human relationships, marital interaction, and personal development.

In these educational contexts, the primary goal is not particularly to diagnose an individual lifestyle, but to present the principles of Adlerian psychology in ways that illustrate how they apply to a person's current patterns of behavior and interpersonal interaction. For example, in examining family-constellation factors related to "personality," the fundamental idea presented is that the family is the laboratory where a person conducts his or her first experiments in living; that is, the family of origin serves as an internship for future relationships. The goal in the human relationships classroom is not so much to teach *why* as it is to teach *how* a person can use insights gained from an understanding of family constellation to modify current patterns of thinking and behaving.

In many instances, accomplishing these goals should not be limited to class lecture or discussion. Often, the concepts can be illustrated by the behavior or atmosphere present in the classroom, by structured exercises, or by outside-of-class experiences. In any case, the classroom is considered a proper place for pursuing therapeutic goals.

Hopefully, using specific theory and general teaching strategies will achieve therapeutic goals—such as helping students understand their own lifestyles, thus opening the possibilities of choosing healthier behaviors (Papenek, 1972)—and, concomitantly, achieving two classic goals of Adlerian therapy: increasing both courage and social interest (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967).

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Both Adler and Dreikurs illustrated the use of clinical practice for benefiting great numbers of people, inasmuch as both clinicians worked “in public,” hoping that the example of one person or family learning to cooperatively solve problems and strengthen relationships might be useful to observers. Conversely, educational settings should also be therapeutic, especially since, in this paper, the goals of both the educational and clinical settings are assumed to be identical.

Family Constellation

College courses designed for marital preparation or strengthening provide examples of how to generate insight into one’s lifestyle. Although numerous concepts related to family constellation and lifestyle can be reviewed, the purpose of the following examples is to demonstrate what can be presented and how classroom interaction can be used to generate insight, action, courage, and social interest.

The concept of family constellation may be introduced in a variety of ways. A typical class experience is grouping students by birth-order categories, requesting that each group develop a “composite personality” that describes every member of the group. Youngest children, for example, are grouped together to share their observations of what youngest children are like. Only those tendencies and qualities on which everyone in the group agrees should be included as components of that specific lifestyle.

In the reporting phase of this exercise, students generally become willing not only to report on their conclusions about their own group, but also to offer opinions about other sibling categories. Typical directions of discussion can be identified.

1. There are comments that support family-constellation theory: oldests feel “only” and middles feel “average” or just “middle.”
2. In a group of second-born individuals, considerable trait oppositeness is acknowledged with respect to themselves and their older siblings, regardless of the sex of the siblings.
3. During the process of asking each group to report its conclusions, there is often behavior that humorously illustrates, in vivo, the impact of family constellation on current behavior. For example, when a youngest group is asked to report, choosing a spokesperson is tossed like a hot potato from one group member to another; or, in a heated exchange between oldest and youngest groups, the middles complain about being “left out.” Often, these here-and-now illustrations of patterned behavior become the springboard for discussion. Once, a very meaningful exchange occurred when the only “only” child in the class raised her hand to share how she felt about being “only.” The

exchange she had observed in the groups sensitized her anew to her goals of belonging.

An extension of this exercise in a marriage-preparation class is to ask for predicted strengths and weaknesses in marriage relationships composed of people from various family constellations. Even more directly, class members who are going steady, are engaged, or are married may be requested to identify a current behavior pattern in their love relationship that is related to their family of origin and to discuss these insights with their companion.

An additional outside-of-class activity involves requesting class members to identify a component of their lifestyles (defined simply as a patterned way of behaving) that they can link to their own family constellation and then share their insights with a family member (if geographically available) or with a close friend. This kind of assignment helps link real-world relationships and experiences with class study and discussion.

Inferiority Feelings

The concept of inferiority feelings generates interest and has wide applicability. Two goals of dealing with inferiority feelings in the classroom are to teach that such feelings are universal and that they can be beneficial. As an initial step, class members may be asked to identify one way in which they feel inferior to others. Interestingly, when the responses to such a question are compiled, answers are predictable by sex. Females identify some physical quality as inferior (legs, nose, face, body—with *overweight* being the most common response), while males identify something that involves interpersonal competence (“I’m not confident,” “I don’t talk enough,” or “I have few friends”). With this kind of data in hand, the idea that everyone feels inferior in some way becomes a reality for the class, and the discussion can then proceed to a general level (what we have in common in our feelings of inferiority suggests something about our cultures, our families, and ourselves) or can be applied more specifically to current relationships. Students may be asked, “What are the benefit and the liability of your inferiority feeling to you?” The ensuing discussion helps illustrate the purposes of people’s attitudes, as well as offer insights into current patterns of behavior. Even more directly, class members may be assigned some outside-of-class “lab” exercises, such as: (a) sharing an inferiority feeling with someone to whom they feel superior, (b) for 3 days acting as if they were competent in that quality they assume to be one of personal inferiority, and (c) answering the question “What would be the consequence of my giving up this feeling of inferiority?” and then sharing the insight with someone they trust.

Social Interest

Social interest is a cornerstone of personal development. A fundamental concern for others is a prerequisite to establishing fulfilling marital relation-

ships; and, in a marriage-preparation class, developing social interest is of prime concern. One class exercise illustrates a way to generate insight and practice social interest simultaneously.

Grand Canyon Exercise

Divide the class into groups of 8 to 10 students. Explain to each group that they have been hiking in the Grand Canyon and are now lost. Within the group, however, exists all the expertise necessary to help the group survive for the 3 days it will take to return to civilization. The tasks of the group are: (a) to identify what knowledge, skills, and talents will be necessary to survive the ordeal and (b) to discover who in the group has the expertise necessary to make survival possible. The special conditions are:

1. Everyone must identify a skill he or she possesses that can assist the group to survive.
2. The members of each group cannot play roles or make up skills. They must draw on their *real* talents and/or experiences as *themselves*.
3. The group must unanimously agree that a talent is valuable; and, if someone in the group has no contribution to make, the group is “stuck” in the canyon until a crucial talent is found for that person.

Several levels of insight can be drawn from this exercise, and there are specific outcomes, not the least of which is the cohesion a group who struggles to solve a problem and reach a goal can achieve. In addition, an appreciation of genuine talents can result. Also, the group is placed in a structured setting where cooperation, not competition, is a prerequisite to success. Transferring that condition to real-world settings, such as parent-child conflicts or husband-wife misunderstandings, is evident to the students as they generate discussion.

Additional Concepts

Numerous Adlerian concepts and assumptions can provide the foundation for functional classes in marriage preparation, personal development, or personality. A sample of ideas to be taught follows.

1. Your family of origin has contributed to your personality development, and both family structure (constellations) and family atmosphere (linked to parental values) help contribute to your uniqueness.
2. Regardless of your past experience, you are responsible for and the governor of your current attitudes and behavior.

3. Your past experience does not determine the way you are today, rather your definition of the future “determines” your present behavior.

4. All behavior is purposive, and your relationships with others help you achieve goals.

5. Social interest is the key to “mental health” and to fulfillment in relationships.

6. Inferiority feelings are universal and can be beneficial.

7. Your current patterns of interactions, including your attitudes toward men, women, the world, and yourself, are reflections of assumptions learned in your family of origin that may be mistaken.

8. Your earliest recollections are selective perceptions consistent with your basic goals in life.

9. Your two basic goals of belonging and superiority can be pursued with or without social interest, with attending consequences of fulfillment or frustration.

10. Courage is the willingness to meet the tasks of life.

11. Relationships with others are fundamental to fulfillment. We are inherently social beings.

12. Any love relationship you pursue will reflect in microcosm your more general attitudes toward others, including the way you handle conflict, give of yourself, receive from others, or cooperate.

Summary

Three specific classroom strategies have been illustrated that are beneficial in teaching Adlerian concepts, such as family constellation, inferiority feelings, social interest, etc. First, class atmosphere and here-and-now behavior in a classroom can be pointed out as representative of the concepts being introduced. Second, structured class exercises can be assigned to provide a common experience from which discussion and insight can be generated. Although the “Grand Canyon Exercise” is an original, Pfeiffer and Jones (1969-1977) have compiled exercises that could be modified for use as teaching tools for specific teleoanalytic concepts. Finally, outside-of-class exercises that require interpersonal involvement in the real world have been suggested. The purpose of this method is to link psychological concepts to classroom examples to actual experience.

It has been proposed that teleoanalytic theory and practice can be used in educational situations to achieve goals identical with those typically thought of in clinical settings. Gaining insight into personal lifestyle, choosing healthier behaviors and goals, increasing courage, and developing social interest are stated goals of education, especially “functional” marriage education. This article has illustrated specific methods of presentation that link concepts with real-life experiences.

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