

Implications of Personality Priority Assessment for the Counseling Process

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The use of the personality priorities, also sometimes called “minilifestyle assessment,” is a relatively recent theoretical formulation developed by Kefir (1971), further conceptualized by Kefir and Corsini (1974), and greatly expanded upon by Pew in his speaking and writing (1976). More recently, Brown developed a structured interview technique to help clients identify and assess toward which of four motivational categories their behavior is most often directed: comfort, pleasing, control, or superiority.

Many of you who have recently been exposed to the personality priorities for the first time may be asking yourselves, as I did after initial exposure to approach, “what manner of beast do we have here?” I would like to discuss the implications of personality priority assessment from the point-of-view of the non-Adlerian, practicing counselor or therapist.

My first impression of personality priority assessment was that it was a potentially powerful and valuable procedure that I might like to include in my own counseling skills repertoire. It seemed to represent another of the many new procedures developed by the Adler-Dreikurs followers. However, like many of these procedures, personality priority assessment seemed to be used as part of a total approach to counseling that is so interrelated, internally consistent, and symmetrically pleasing (“Gestalt,” if you will), that I wondered if it was possible to use only the assessment procedure as part of another, non-Adlerian system, my own. It seemed to me that I might consider myself to be a magician with a cloak of several colors representing the several theoretical positions that I have incorporated into my personal counseling style. The Adlerian, to an outsider, appeared to be a powerful new magician with a cloak of one color, which the Adlerian may see as being white, but the outsider first perceives as gray. I had no doubts that this new spell for ridding people of demons, personality priority assessment, was both powerful and potentially useful, but I was unsure if I could learn the spell and use it as part of my own, multicolored approach, or if I would have to change my entire style and adopt an Adlerian cloak. Therefore, since I was unwilling to give up my personal

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style, I knew that I needed to carefully examine and define the personality priority assessment procedure.

What, then, is personality priority assessment? It is apparent to me that it is a strategy that makes use of a typological system. Brown's approach describes four types: superiority, control, comfort, and pleasing (1976). The Adlerians suggest that these priorities are methods by which we choose to find our place in the world and belong with other people. As a social learning theorist myself, this aspect strongly appeals to me. Are the four categories adequate; i.e., are they enough to describe all human behavior? Mozak has identified a number of lifestyles similar to the priorities Brown discusses. One list, (Eckstein, Baruth & Mahrer, 1975). cites fourteen, which is probably still not complete. When I asked a graduate student if four priorities were enough, he responded that "150 are probably not enough." It seems overly critical of the system to say there should be more or less. As in any typological system, too few types may seem limiting, whereas too many defeat the purpose of trying to organize behavior into a reasonable system through which we may adequately help people. What is important is that the priorities seem to fit our clinical impressions of how people are. My feeling is that, never forgetting that there are other important factors and ways to understand a human being, the personality priority assessment strategy can be very useful to a large number of clients, and, if responsibly used, does seem to trigger a strong recognition response of, "Yeah, that really is my priority."

There is utility to the strategy from the client's point-of-view. Part of the reason the client seeks the help of the counselor is that he or she does not understand the reasons for his or her behavior. In fact, many clients are especially terrified at an existential level that they and their behavior may be "nonunderstandable." It may also be that clients often feel that their comfortable and usual ways of seeing and perceiving the world are no longer accurate nor adequate. The resultant inadequacy, confusion, dissonance, helplessness, feared loss of identity, and susceptibility toward dependency are all common factors we must recognize and attend to with most of our clients. An advantage of the personality priority assessment strategy is that it is based on a teleological approach, which, simply stated in Adlerian terms, means that all behavior is purposeful. By helping a client to explore and understand his or her purpose or purposes through identification of priorities, the client can be assisted to understand him or herself, to feel a sense of identity and meaning, and to have a structure through which he or she can feel responsible for self. In many ways, the personality priorities constitute a cognitive framework which can help the client feel a strong sense of mastery and ability to handle him or herself and which can be more quickly assessed than can a more complete lifestyle.

The dynamic aspects of the priorities are also important. In the first place, the priorities are seen as process factors, rather than content or outcome. The

client can see and understand the ways or mechanisms through which he or she attempts to belong in the world. The priorities themselves are not inherently good or bad, but may be used in useful or useless ways. This allows clients to feel that they may keep the fabric of their identity, while adjusting the manner in which they build upon and use this fabric. Perls discussed this (1970) when he suggested that many clients appear to undergo a severe identity crises and fear of death as they face the giving up of old behavioral styles and he suggested that the paradox of becoming whole involves becoming "who we are, not who we are not." The personality priority assessment strategy allows a person to retain the "who" of what he or she is (i.e., the priority), but encourages use of the priority or priorities in more useful, social-interest directed ways.

The style of conducting the personality priority assessment is critical. In many ways the four priorities are somewhat like the system of transactional analysis, parts of which I occasionally use with clients in order to help them have labels to facilitate understanding of their behavior. However, there seems to be a similar danger in the two approaches, namely that they can be used as gimmicky, restrictive systems of psychological chess or to foster dependency on the part of the client by making the counselor appear as the expert wizard who magically reveals the marvels of the client's hidden processes. To me, the value of the strategy is to the client, not the counselor. If conducted appropriately, the client is assured that he or she is the expert and that the counselor is a consultant. As some insightful, but skeptical, people have said when first encountering the technique, "But a good counselor should be able to know the priorities of the client by noticing verbal and non-verbal behavior." My response is that I agree! However, the strategy is not for the counselor, as too many of our limited diagnostic systems seem to be, but for the client. It is a highly effective, powerful, and useful way for the client to gain a perceptive awareness of his or her behavioral style.

Essentially, personality priority assessment is a counseling strategy with a great deal of potential utility. As with any counseling strategy, it may be used appropriately or inappropriately. Appropriate usage depends upon the emphasis being placed on the client's needs. As I was preparing this paper, I was also in the process of giving midterm examinations to my graduate classes in counseling. It seems to me that the most effective use of examination results is providing students with the opportunity to organize their knowledge and to open up to further exploration and learning. The ideal use of the personality priority assessment strategy results in this same organizing and opening for clients. In other words, a poor use would result in a diagnostic, closing, restrictive process which would leave the client saying, "So now I know what I am and I am stuck with it." Appropriate use results in a growing, learning, opening attitude, manifested in a client statement such as, "Ah, now I understand how and why I behave in certain ways and I can use this knowledge to more appropriately deal with myself and the world." This opening of

the client to psychological exploration seems to be critical in any counseling or therapeutic process.

Use of the Priorities

I think the strategy could be most effectively used in terms of themes and that all-important factor, timing. In individual counseling and therapy, I have used the strategy when I thought that the client had reached the point beyond mere symptom description, had disconfirmed old ways of looking at the world, and was genuinely interested in exploring motivations in a new and open way. With one client, this time occurred during the ninth session, with another during the second session, and with a long-term therapy patient at about the fiftieth session. The strategy has resulted in strong, positive movement for all of these clients. I have also found that mini-lifestyle assessment is much more sophisticated and complex in its implications than it appears at first glance. For instance, the long-term client I mentioned has been variously diagnosed as chronic schizophrenic, simple type, paranoid type, psychopath, drug addiction, etc., and has been in therapy with most of the professionals in the area at one time or another. Pleasing, comfort, and superiority have all been apparently important priorities to her. However, it recently came to me that, unlikely as it appears at a behavioral level, her primary priority is control! She has learned to feel like a plus when things go well and smoothly and she is in control. However, most of her behavior has been extremely uncontrolled. This contradiction has led to a great deal of frustration, conflict, and mobilization of all three other priorities throughout her life, but the key is that she really only values herself when she is in control. The strategy has utility at many levels of understanding and depth of dynamic conflict.

There are several other obvious places where I think personality priority assessment may be effectively used. One is in career work. We have developed and conducted career development groups which include a number of exploration activities, the administration and individual interpretation of a battery of interest inventories, and some didactic presentations consisting of decision-making model, Super's vocational life stages model, and Super's hypothesis that career choice is part of a developmental process that primarily consists of developing and implementing a self-concept. It seems to me that personality priority assessment would be quite valuable in this type of group to help people organize their thinking about their self-concept in terms of their priorities.

One other potential use is with graduate students in counselor training programs. I am very interested in the developmental process of counselor training, especially in terms of the emphasis on self and attitudinal factors. I have noticed that our students who have been exposed to personality priority assessment and who have applied it to themselves seem to be open to and directed toward gaining more knowledge about themselves, and to examining new theoretical knowledge in terms of how it fits for them personally.

Conclusion

I am certain there are many other uses for the mini-lifestyle assessment strategy. Perhaps you have already thought of some. By describing and understanding the procedure from the client's point-of-view and in terms of therapeutic factors familiar to me, I have found that I can easily include mini-lifestyle assessment in my repertoire. If I still have any doubts about whether or not the procedure has any validity, as I think about this paper, I realize how thoroughly and in what detail I have prepared in order for things to go both well and smoothly and to avoid humiliation and embarrassment. As one of my graduate students often says, "Oops, are my priorities showing?"

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