

Basic Applications of Adlerian Psychology

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My husband and I have found a new career in retirement: teaching courses on the *Basic Applications of Adlerian Psychology for Self-Understanding and Human Relationships*. This manuscript will present an outline of our course.

Background

At the first session, we try to discover the interests, backgrounds, and expectations of each group member. How much theory we present varies with each group. We begin with a brief history of Alfred Adler and his association with Freud and Jung, of Rudolf Dreikurs, and the Adlerian movement. We also share with the group some of the benefits we have experienced and admit our strong personal bias in favor of the Adlerian orientation. We also stress the necessity to develop a strong sense of individual responsibility since we cannot blame our genes, our parents, society, or other people for our outlook on life, what we do, and how we feel. If members of the group seem to be interested in comparisons with other schools of psychology, we will answer their questions. However, ours is a course on Adlerian psychology and we ask that they try to understand it, though we do not require that they accept it. (Actually, our experience has been that we usually end up with 100% “converts” and great enthusiasm, although few of our group members had ever heard of Alfred Adler or Individual Psychology prior to taking our course.)

Family Constellation

When discussing Family Constellation, we distribute replicas of “T” shirts (cut out of 8½” x 11” bond paper). We ask each group member to think of himself as a young child—preferably preschool, but always under the age of eight—and to think of his family as he saw it then. How did he find his place in his family? What role did he play in his family during his early childhood? We find it helpful to display samples of decorated “T” shirts from other groups, especially those which show artistic ingenuity. One man drew a sketch of

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Dennis the Menace and under it "I'm a brat." A woman drew a little girl with a halo, another drew a girl with a crown, another a "devil," etc. Sometimes decorating one's "T" shirt is assigned as "homework" and other times they do it in class, using felt pens supplied by the leaders. We ask them to add personality traits and mechanisms they used as young children (crying, being obedient, being bossy, being helpful, rebelling, etc.). Family mottoes may be included as well as family values (what was important to both parents).

We diagram each group member's family constellation on the board and they add their diagram to their "T" shirts. Then we ask the only children in the group to show, explain, and compare their shirts. We discuss *Birth Order: Characteristics of Positions in the Family Constellation* (Dewey 1978) after each group of only, oldest, second, youngest, and middle children have shared and interpreted their "T" shirts in turn. Usually there is a high correlation between the reports of each group and the characteristics listed in the manual. However, we always point out Adler's caution "It always could be different."

After this discussion, we ask "How would your "T" shirt suit you today?" Most say it is still appropriate. However, one man disagreed, "I did a 180° turn once I went off to college," he insisted. His "T" shirt had "Wee Willie" in center front. He explained this was his Irish grandmother's endearing name for him. Grandmother lived next door and regularly cared for him while his mother worked. Grandmother overprotected him, exaggerated his slightest physical symptoms into "sicknesses," wouldn't let him play with other children lest he get hurt in their rough and tumble activities. He staunchly claimed that he is not that way today. We asked his wife who was also in the group, if she ever saw vestiges of "Wee Willie" and she nodded vigorously. Others in the group also saw beyond the heavy beard of a competent man the "Wee Willie." At the next class meeting, he confided that he had begun to recognize the "Wee Willie" that is still there and could accept him as part of himself.

This exercise is reported to have helped many group members to understand themselves, their children, their spouses, and others. It also serves to get the members of the group sharing with one another.

Life Style

In this unit, we define Adler's concept of life style as differentiated from the real estate and furniture advertising, etc. We stress the importance of early interpretations and discouragements and of "payoffs" received during one's early years which influence the "tunnel vision" of our present convictions. In our lay groups we sometimes analyze one or two early recollections, using Mosak's (1977) "Headline Technique" (capturing the essence of the recollection as if a newspaper editor were to write a headline for the central theme of the recollection), and pointing out the individual's method of dealing with situations and the purpose that the early recollection may serve (to

affirm, to remind, to caution, etc.). I usually share some of my own early recollections together with their interpretations.

With professional counselors, we teach the technique of using early recollections as a projective technique (Mosak, 1977) and practice analyzing family constellations, working up the individual's outlook on life, his assets, and his mistaken apperceptions.

Social Interest

Since we prefer a positive approach, we introduce the subject of *Social Interest* before we discuss *Typologies of Life Style* (Dewey, 1978). In abbreviated courses, *Typologies* is omitted. It is difficult for members of a class to recognize their own life style without a formal life style determination. However, most can recognize their *Number One Priority*, which is one facet of the life style. We have found this to be helpful in understanding oneself and others. At the beginning of the session on *The Four Priorities of Life Style*, we ask each member to fill out a *Priorities Scale*. This is our revision of Roy Kern's *Lifestyle Scale*, with some additions and alterations suggested by Robert Powers and Jo Anne Hahn and by several members of our classes. We stress that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers so most people find this a fun thing to do. After the results have been tallied, we outline the *Four Priorities* using the chart in the manual (page 23). We then ask members of the group to share, if they wish to do so, their tally scores and to state how accurate they believe the scale to be. We have an indication of high validity, but are still testing it.

Life Tasks

In the section on *Life Tasks*, we encourage all to read Dr. Dreikurs' lectures "How to Get Along With Oneself" and "The Courage To Be Imperfect." During the course, we also suggest (and lend our copies of) *Social Equality: The Challenge of Today* (Dreikurs, 1971), *How To Strengthen Your Marriage and Family* (Allred, 1976) *The Science of Living* (Adler, 1969), *Adlerian Counseling* (Sweeney, 1975) and *The Basics of Self-Acceptance* (Dinkmeyer, 1977). Other suggestions are in the annotated bibliography in the manual.

Emotions and Guilt Feelings

The unit on *Emotions and Guilt Feelings* is very popular. We stress the usefulness of emotions, our ability to control our emotions if the situation behoves that we do so, and the Adlerian concept that we use our emotions, although we are usually unaware of this. We share with the group how it has been useful for us to understand our emotional response to a situation by asking ourselves "Do I feel threatened?" "Am I afraid of being inadequate?" (especially if our number one priority is *superiority*). "Might I lose control?"

(especially if our number one priority is *control*). “What do I want to avoid?” “How come I’m so elated?” etc.

In discussing the subject of *Guilt Feelings*, we stress Dr. Dreikurs’ often stated “Mistakes are to learn from, not to suffer from.” We encourage that, after a mistake has been made, we ask ourselves “Now what can I learn from this?” We draw the difference between honest regretting that we made a mistake, especially if someone else has been hurt by it—but learning from our mistake with a determination not to repeat it—and “indulging” in guilt feelings *instead* of taking steps to correct the mistake or to learn from it. We point out that guilt feelings are a type of bragging in most cases and there is the likelihood that we will continue the same type of behavior after indulging in guilt feelings. We deliberately use Adler’s “spit in the soup” technique (We make the person aware of what he is doing so it then becomes less palatable), by reporting how Dr. Dreikurs used to tell us “When someone complains about feeling guilty, watch out for the mischief he is about to do!” We ask group members to recall a time when they felt guilty. “Instead of feeling guilty about this past event, how might you learn from it?” Many have reported that they experienced almost instant relief after this exercise.

Conflict Solving

Under the topic *Conflict Solving*, we outline Dr. Dreikurs’ four procedures of conflict solving through democratic transactions (Dreikurs, 1972) and Gordon’s specific steps for problem solving (Gordon, 1970). We also suggest that we clearly identify “Whose problem is it?” and distinguish between those problems which do not tangibly affect me (though they may bother me) and those that actually do affect me (interfere with my life). The first group may be left to the other person and the second group problem-solved by us together. We teach the appropriate uses of “Active Listening” (Gordon, 1970) when one is friendly and wants to help the other person. When one is angry, upset or “uptight” we recommend the use of “I” messages (Gordon, 1970). An “I” message says “This is how your behavior affects me, how I feel about it, and what I am willing to do about it.”

To facilitate decision making, we recommend the “Road of Life” strategy. Using a diagram, one writes down the advantages and disadvantages of each possible choice. “Through the diagram, one can explore a variety of new relationships, as well as see these relationships from a new or unusual perspective” (Williams, 1976).

Inferiority Feelings

Under *Inferiority Feelings*, we point out that these may have nothing to do with *being* inferior. We suggest Dreikurs’ four steps to overcome feelings of inferiority: (a) Become aware of our prejudice—that what we think of as

“facts” are largely our own bias. (b) Stop being afraid of making a mistake and learn to take mistakes in stride. (c) Cultivate the courage to be imperfect and concentrate on meeting the needs of the situation, rather than being concerned with how we are doing. (d) Enjoy the pleasure in the activity; simply do our best and let the chips fall where they may.

Dreams

The final topic is usually the *Adlerian Interpretation of Dreams*. Two weeks in advance, we assign “homework”: Write down a recent dream and record the current circumstances at the time of dreaming (what problems you are facing or a decision you must make, etc.). To the remark “But I never dream!” we agree that there can be people who do not dream: Those under heavy doses of certain drugs and those who are very severely mentally retarded and thus lack the creativity to dream. We also point out that by refusing to remember a dream one can exhibit one’s lack of cooperativeness. We suggest going to bed with a pad and pencil nearby and recording the dream *immediately* upon awakening. By the next session, most group members have written at least one dream. The above statement is repeated to those who have not done so. At the last session we outline the Adlerian theory about dreams and invite those who wish to do so to share their dreams with the group. We encourage each group member to analyze his own dreams in light of what he has learned about himself and the Adlerian interpretation of dreams.

Although my husband and I serve as teachers of the course and co-leaders of the groups, we also participate as group members. Thus we outline our own family constellations, tell some of our own early recollections, acknowledge our number one priorities, and some of the self-defeating mechanisms and strengths of our life styles. I tell the groups of how Dr. Dreikurs “spit in my soup” and of how I have made considerable progress but am still working on developing my courage to be imperfect. We try to model optimism, social interest, a positive approach, and to practice mutual respect between ourselves and in all interactions with members of the groups.

We also encourage these practices by group members. When we catch a student saying “He made me angry,” we ask him to correct it to “I made myself angry by reacting to something he said or did.” When one says “I cannot,” we suggest he substitute “I am unwilling.” When one bemoans a mistake, we ask “Now what can you learn from it?” When a certain behavior cannot be understood, we ask “What was the result of that behavior? Could it be that was its purpose?”

This course is not intended to be a therapy group but many members of our groups report that they have experienced therapeutic effects. They claim

that they have increased their self-esteem, become more tolerant of their imperfections, feel less of a victim or martyr, learned to understand themselves and others, and have developed more meaningful relationships with their children, their spouses, and their fellow men. Several people have repeated the course because they found it to be so helpful and they wanted to learn the principles more thoroughly.

Also, they—and we—have had fun together!

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