

Clarifying Concepts of The Number One Priority

John B. Nield

One of the basic assumptions of Adlerian psychology is that all behavior is purposeful and goal-directed. One of Dreikurs' many contributions was the four goals of misbehavior that the child uses: attention-getting, power, revenge, and inadequacy. By understanding the mistaken goals of children, the adult who works with children is helped to understand the purpose of the child's behavior. They are helped not only in understanding but given direction as to how to confront the child with the mistaken purpose of the behavior, how to arrange consequences for the child to learn other productive ways of belonging and also how to give direction for encouraging more responsible behavior.

The mistaken goals of children are used mainly with the person up to the age of 12. Dinkmeyer, Pew, and Dinkmeyer (1979) point out that the goals can still be recognized with teenagers and even older adults but the significant others may have changed and the influence may not be the parents as much as the peer group, teachers, or community at large. Often the lifestyle assessment is used when the mistaken goals of children are not as meaningful and the therapist and student wish for deeper insight. Using the lifestyle assessment is time consuming although it contributes a great deal of information and direction to a person's life.

Another contribution from Adlerian theory which seems as practical as the mistaken goals of children is that of the number one priority interview (Kefir 1971). Pew (1976) elaborated on the concept; Brown (1976) contributed a systematic text of how to use the concept in a therapeutic setting; and Dewey (1978) developed an instrument to test for the number one priority. In Dinkmeyer, Pew, and Dinkmeyer's (1979) latest writing they stated that for Adlerian counseling and psychotherapy, one of the major competencies includes the use of the number one priority as a clinical method to investigate one facet of the lifestyle.

The personality priority is a wealth of wisdom for working with people from age 12 through adulthood. The helper is enabled to understand the purpose behind an individual's behavior and to understand one thread that runs through a person's lifestyle which can give direction and meaning to relationships.

John B. Nield is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology and Counseling at Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas 66762.

The purpose of this writing is to discuss the clarifying concepts of the number one priority and introduce implications for the use of the number one priority in an educational setting for counseling and teaching in public schools while consulting with students, parents, teachers, and/or administrators.

Clarifying concept number 1: Essentially every individual has a number one priority: pleasing others, comfort, control, or superiority. Each individual, from within their number one priority, can use that priority in a useful way or in a useless way. Understanding one's priority enables a teacher, student, client, partner, or therapist to modify motivation so that the helpee can use their priority in more useful ways.

Pew (1976), Brown (1976), and Sperry (1978) all agree that one of the easiest behaviors distinguishing the number one priorities include the following client complaints; superiority complaints about work; control complaints about social distance from others; comfort dislikes being labeled unproductive or lazy; and pleasing others laments about being fragmented with too many to please.

A second important diagnostic technique suggested by Pew (1976), Brown (1976), and Sperry (1978) include the feelings and thoughts one tries to avoid when operating from the number one priority (superiority strains to avoid the feeling of meaninglessness; control endeavors to oppose embarrassment; comfort dislikes experiencing pain and stress; and pleasing others loathes rejection).

Clarifying concept number 2: Each individual has access to the other three priorities. A person with the priority of superiority might have a maintaining priority of control, then pleasing, or comfort. Other combinations exist with each individual having a unique hierarchy of personality priorities. The priority itself is what the individual gives precedence to. It is how they obtain their ultimate plus feeling of belonging (Pew, 1976). A person can, however, use the other priorities through a priority adjustment to encourage and cooperate with those they work.

To illustrate clarifying concept number 2, a student with a priority of superiority may say “Can I get started on my project right now?” A teacher who has a priority of control may tend to respond with “Shh, its reading time now, Read your book!” However, by using a priority adjustment the teacher might say, “If you have finished your reading you may work quietly on your project.”

The reasoning for the priority adjustment is that the teacher with a priority of control tends to do one step at a time. When its reading time it is not project time. The child with a priority of superiority moves quickly and may be ready to begin the next assignment before the other students. The teacher’s

priority adjusts to the pace of the student using a priority of superiority. The teacher set limits and consequences on the reading assignments yet supported the child by cooperating by letting him/her work at his/her own pace without disturbing others.

Clarifying concept number 3: People respond to one another from their own number one priority. People tend to be drawn toward behaviors of others with the same priority or they may feel repulsed by behaviors of others with the same priority (Pew 1976, Sperry 1978, Dinkmeyer, Pew & Dinkmeyer, 1979). A person with a number one priority of control may be repulsed or challenged so much by other people with the same priority that they avoid them or sense a camaraderie and are attracted to them. Although people respond to one another from within their number one priority, what is more important is how that priority is used.

To illustrate the way teachers and students interact and use their priorities, consider the following example of a particular second grade which was considered by many to be ideal having only 13 students enrolled. The teacher also had a teacher's aide, yet this class was one of the most troublesome in the school.

When this group of students entered kindergarten their teacher, who was a recent graduate of a teachers' college had a number one priority of pleasing others. Being able to please every one of the children and being liked by them was her ultimate plus. The thing that she most dreaded and worked against was to be rejected. She conducted her class in a laissez faire manner giving the children all rights and privileges so they would not reject her. The irony of the situation was that when the class was promoted to first grade, the teacher likewise was moved with them as their first grade teacher.

When these children got to the second grade another teacher had a number one priority of control. The first two years of school had not prepared them to cooperate in useful ways in a classroom. Both teacher and students had difficulty in this regard. The teacher with a number one priority of control, attempted to control the situation and often tried to control the students in order to avoid embarrassment.

Clarifying concept number 4: Under stress the number one priority becomes most apparent. Every individual uses their number one priority either in a useful or useless way to obtain a plus or to avoid a minus feeling (Pew, 1976). To illustrate, a person with a number one priority of superiority may enjoy talking with a few people where he/she can safely be number one. This person can elaborate, talk and remain center stage. However, at less secure social gatherings, in order to avoid a feeling of being worthless, the person does not get involved in any stressful situations where he/she cannot be number one. The person may avoid the group altogether to protect the

number one priority of being right, best, and first. He/she may be discouraged and retreat in order to escape the feeling of being meaningless. Under stress, avoidance behavior can be used in a useless way, yet maintain the number one priority of superiority while failing to contribute to the group.

Clarifying concept number 5: Since each person's number one priority is manifested in overt behaviors, they are observable. One can observe priority characteristics as Brown (1976), Pew (1976), Dinkmeyer, Pew & Dinkmeyer (1979), and Sperry (1978) point out, by the way a person walks, their body language, the words they choose, the chronic hassle or things they complain most about, and the feelings that they elicit in other people. A person's number one priority helps the therapist to understand the movement of the client, the student, the partner. It gives an indication of a thread running through the lifestyle and the motivation of how to belong (Pew, 1976). It also recognizes the creative self of each individual and that they may choose alternatives.

Clarifying concept number 6: A thing can be its opposite. The same is true with the priorities. A weakness in a person may be nothing more than an overcompensation of a strength. A person with a number one priority of pleasing may be perceived as being lively and expressive, the one from whose lips even the most idle chatter seems like fascinating news. For a time, guests at a party may have even desired the abilities of this artful conversationalist. After a while other guests may begin to perceive the pleasing person pervading more space and time than is rightfully his/her and are soon resented. The attraction is suddenly wearing thin from overexposure. Even the captivating information now becomes a chattering of mundane gossip. It is not a problem of quality, but one of quantity. Failing to properly monitor their own strength, this person has moved from strength to weakness. Thus, a thing can be its opposite. This person's strength has boomeranged into a weakness.

Clarifying concept number 7: The final clarifying concept consists of behaviors observed representing each of the number one priorities. Four students in the public schools are briefly described. Since the number one priority appears to become useful at the eighth grade level possible recommendations are clarified for the following behavioral descriptions and each of the four number one priorities.

A Child With a Pleasing Priority

The student whose number one priority is that of pleasing is a child who is very sensitive to the feelings of self and to the feelings of others. This student tends to be oriented toward people and events that have personal meaning. S/he tends to organize and keep things for the personal meaning they have for self, rather than for their practical value. Although this is not to take away from the development of social interest, it does give an idea of the motivation

of the child as s/he tries to avoid rejection. An in-class English project for such a child might be to have him/her write about a favorite book s/he read relating to an animal, a pet, or something that has meaning for the student.

A Child With a Comfort Priority

The student with the number one priority of comfort asks many perceptive questions that tend to be original, creative, and innovative but that take time for the child to ponder. S/he often seems to be thinking something over and likes to be left alone with those thoughts. Under pressure this student does not respond. It is easier to work with this student if a choice is given for the assignment. "The assignment can be handed in Wednesday but the final day of acceptance will be Friday." By Wednesday the student would probably start to sit down and actually begin writing the project. The student using the comfort priority does not respond constructively under pressure or stress. A reading assignment of current interest to the student, or independent reading project requiring creativity and imagination, would be examples of what the student might find interesting.

A Child With a Control Priority

The student with the number one priority of control is an unemotional child who is most interested in details, factual information—s/he likes graphs, charts, and making plans. Such a student tends to overplan, and overthink things through. This child is so concerned about being accurate and being right, that to avoid embarrassment, will overplan. An assignment for this child in an English class might be to write something that would help in organizing the environment, such as a system to conserve energy at the school.

A Child With a Superiority Priority

A student whose number one priority is that of superiority is a student who likes action. This student appears to have a high energy level and seems to keep going on an activity long after others are through with it. S/he tends to want to wear the subject out. S/he is interested in things that are practical, that can come right to the point, that are down to earth and that can happen immediately. This student tends to have too many projects and gets tired of doing too many things. To others the student appears to get things done, yet often says, "Oh! I am so overworked." An assignment for this student might be to become involved in creating a dramatization of a reading assignment.

Summary

The purpose of this writing has been to point out clarifying concepts of the number one priority and give some application as they apply to youth from ages 12 through adulthood. Much has been left out since the concept is

relatively new in application and research. The bibliography will aid the reader in finding the basics of the priority concepts such as why only four priorities and how the priorities are used to interact with other people. As Dr. Pew introduced his NASAP convention speech in 1974, he stated, "It appears that the concept of the number one priority does represent a clearcut new addition to Adlerian theory and practice." The personality priority concept presents a new dimension to motivation modification, lifestyle assessment, holism, creative self, the encouraging process, and appears to be as practical as the mistaken goals of children.

References

- Brown, J. F. *Comparison of two Methods of identifying personality priorities*. Clinton, Maryland: B & F Associates, Inc., 1977.
- Brown, J. F. *Practical applications of the personality priorities* (2nd edition). Clinton, Maryland: B & F Associates, Inc., 1976.
- Dewey, E. *Basic applications of Adlerian psychology*. Coral Springs, Florida: CMTI Press, 1978.
- Dinkmeyer, D. C., Pew, W. L., & Dinkmeyer, D. C., Jr. *Adlerian counseling and psychotherapy*. Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1979.
- Kefir, N., & Corsini, R. J. *Disposition sets: A contribution to typology*. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 1974, 30, 163-178.
- Kefir, N. *Priorities*. Paper given at ICASSI, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1971.
- Long, K. *Application of the personality priorities to couple counseling*. *The Individual Psychologist*, 1979, 16 (1), 41-45.
- Pew, W. L. *The number one priority*. St. Paul, Minnesota: St. John's Hospital—Marriage and Family Education Center, 1976.
- Sperry, L. *The together experience*. San Diego, California: Beta Books, 1978.
- Ward, D. C. *Implications of the personality priority assessment for the counseling process*. *The Individual Psychologist*, 1979, 16 (2), 12-16.

We are the only people that feels it has descended from savages, everybody else feels that they are descendants from God.
