

# Innovative Interpretative Guidelines in Life Style Investigations

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One of Alfred Adler's most significant contributions to the helping profession was his unified notion of an individual's "life style," the constant theme of life with its endless variations. In recent years psychologists and sociologists have further utilized such "holistic" or "gestalt" themes, while the term "life style" is increasingly becoming an integral part of our contemporary vocabulary. For example, Gushurst (1971) defines a lifestyle as "The total system which accounts for the consistency and directionality of an individual's life movement" (p. 30). Other writers have equated lifestyle with self or ego, personality, the unity of the personality, individuality, individual creative ability and opinion about oneself and the problems of life. The purpose of this article is to briefly review life style theory as well as to present practical interpretation guidelines.

Adler (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956) notes that, "the style of life is the individual's opinion of himself and the world and his unique way of striving for the goal in his particular situation" (p. 172). While Dreikurs (1953) wrote that "the life style is comparable to a characteristic theme in a piece of music. It brings the rhythm of recurrence into our lives" (p. 44).

According to Allen (1971), Adler's basic notions of life style overlap considerably with what Skinner (1969) has termed "rule-governed behavior," with what Galatier, Miller, and Pribram (1960) call "plans," with Frank's (1961) "assumptive system," with Kelly's (1955) "supraordinate constructs," and

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with Rotter's (1966) "generalized expectancies of reinforcement." Despite the vast diversity concerning different meanings for the term "life style" itself, Ansbacher (1967) summarized the common "life style" properties of all the various writers by systematizing the following similarities.

### **1. Unifying Aspect**

The word "style" includes the characteristic of cutting across ordinary boundaries and uniting what might otherwise be quite separate entities. Individual feelings, emotions, and behaviors are assimilated to be consistent with our goal-directed behavior. Thus, one does not "lose" his or her temper. Rather, the choice is made to "throw it away" as consistent with one's personal intention.

### **2. Unique and Creative Aspects**

One style is always different from others, although similarities do exist. For example, children learn to write by following a standard cultural model; nevertheless, each person varies the model in a unique, idiomatic manner.

Of course, spontaneous and unique behavior implies choices on the part of individuals. And such choices are based on a forward-oriented, purposive, value psychology rather than on a casualistic, reductionistic psychology.

### **3. Operational, Functional and Constancy Aspects**

Adler proclaimed life style to be a "psychology of use" as contrasted with a psychology of possession. Objective conditions or stimuli are focused on and used in accordance with a person's own unique life style. Thus, the "inner" phenomenological self is recognized as an active and creative center, rather than a passive reactor merely receiving stimulation from the external environment.

A life style investigation initially focuses on an individual's constellation by examining the extent to which such factors as birth order, sibling interactions, and parental values and attitudes influence personality development.

Early recollections (ER's) are the second source of information collected in lifestyle analysis. "They provide a brief picture of how an individual views himself, other people, and life in general, what he strives for in life and what he anticipates is likely to occur in life" (Gushurst, 1971). ER's are closely akin to a projective theory of memory by identifying the unique statement of, and

movement toward, important goals. They help identify personal decisions of the individual.

Some of the basic principles of Life Style Analysis can be found in Eckstein, Baruth, and Mahrer (1978) as well as Baruth and Eckstein (1981). However, the specific purpose of the present article is to present interpretative guidelines which the authors have developed to supplement other widely-used approaches. A primary emphasis will be to show how sibling ratings can be utilized in a total life style summary.

### **Interpretation Skills**

After obtaining life style data concerning family atmosphere and early recollections by means of a structured interview, the counselor generally spends some time alone to determine how the individual tends to view other people, himself or herself, and life in general. In analyzing the life style data, the focus is always on *goals* and not *causes*. Emphasis is placed on the "payoff" for behavior rather than the actual or imagined reasons by seeking to answer "for what purpose?" rather than "why?". Even in the most negative, self-defeating activities there is some reason which helps explain how such behaviors are perpetuated. Frequently, individuals, by means of their own "private logic," cling tenaciously to what Albert Ellis, founder of rational emotive therapy, has called "irrational ideas."

One section of a life style investigation focuses upon a series of descriptive adjectives by which the individual rates himself or herself in relation to other siblings during their first eight years of life. Only children rate themselves with respect to "children in general." Ratings indicate the sibling who is highest and lowest on each adjective; if the individual involved was not at either extreme, the direction or tendency toward which the individual was inclined is noted. Examples of adjectives in the sibling ratings include "most intelligent, hardest worker," etc.

The starting point for interpreting family constellation information is to look for themes or patterns. By knowing how individuals view the siblings(s) in their families, we can hypothesize that they probably perceive others in their present peer group in much the same way. The manner in which the individuals successfully or unsuccessfully found belonging and significance in their family group is probably repeated, only on a more sophisticated level, with their present social groups. Mistaken notions toward life, established at an early age, are also likely to continue.

Harold Mosak (Nikelly, 1971) identified fourteen commonly occurring

lifestyle themes. Such motifs can serve as a general summary in deriving a lifestyle statement. The authors have found that certain patterns of responses from the siblings rating section tend to coincide with Mosak's general life style themes by means of Table 1.

**TABLE 1. SUGGESTED GUIDES FOR SIBLING RATINGS & GENERAL LIFESTYLE THEMES**

<b>Generalized Lifestyle Theme</b>	<b>Rated themselves MOST when compared to other siblings</b>	
Getter	Selfishness Having own way Temper tantrums	Materialistic Rebellious Sensitive
Driver	Hardest worker Critical of others Best grades in school	Idealistic Standards of accomplishment
Controller	Critical of others Rebellious Intelligent	Standards of accomplishment Having own way (Least) Spontaneous
Need to be right	Critical of others Conforming Best grades in school	Sensitive—easily hurt Trying to please
Need to be superior	Selfishness Temper tantrums Strongest Attractive	Most athletic Having own way Idealistic
Need to be liked	Trying to please Sensitive—easily hurt Helping around house	Punished Considerate Conforming Attractive
Need to be good	Standards of accomplishment Critical of others	Conforming Idealistic Most athletic Hardest worker
Opposed to everything	Rebellious Temper tantrums	Spoiled Sensitive—easily hurt

Victim	Idealistic Sensitive— easily hurt	Punished
Martyr	Sensitive— easily hurt Trying to please	Punished Idealistic
Baby	Having own way Temper tantrums Selfishness	Attractive Spoiled
Inadequate person	Trying to please (Low) Intelligence	Sensitive— easily hurt (Low) Standards of accomplishment, etc.
Avoid feelings	Intelligent Conforming	Standards of accomplishment Best grades in school
Excitement seeker	Sense of humor Rebellious Selfishness	Spoiled Idealistic Spontaneous

Although we can use the fourteen lifestyle themes as a general summary, it should be noted that each individual has a unique lifestyle. We must continue to “fine-tune” an individual’s lifestyle statement until it “fits” this particular person. If certain characteristics of an individual do not seem to fit our hypothesized lifestyle statement, one must be flexible enough to form new hypotheses until the data does fit.

Another important point in interpreting family constellation information is to identify patterns of similarities and differences. The concept of “180 degrees across the circle” indicates that we define ourselves not only by what we are, but also by what we are not. By discovering how others are different from an individual, we learn more about that individual himself.

Another helpful aid used to interpret family constellation data is to imagine that you are growing up in a family situation described by your clients. What would it be like to have their parents? How would you get along with their siblings? What would you do to belong? What was the family atmosphere like? By using this technique, you are able to make a more accurate hypothesis about a person’s lifestyle statement.

The following systematic developmental life style summary has been of use to the authors in their counseling experiences:

A. *Family Constellation Summary*, including the influence of ordinal position, sibling ratings, parental influences, and general lifestyle themes.

B. *Early Recollections Summary* — (See Eckstein, Baruth & Mahrer, 1978, pgs. 15-28, for specific interpretative guidelines).

C. *Mistaken & Self-Defeating Apperceptions* or ways we make trouble for ourselves. For example, needing undue attention and/or adult approval, low self-concept, irrational fears, feelings of unfairness, stereotyped gender or racial attitudes, etc.

D. *Assets*. Strengths that the persons can be encouraged to utilize more successfully in overcoming difficulties.

E. *Re-orientation*. The lifestyle data and analysis are presented in an interpretation session commonly called the insight portion of the lifestyle process. The individual is allowed to react to all portions of the lifestyle analysis and encouraged to develop and deepen the concepts as they relate to his or her current situation. After this procedure the question to be answered is "What is standing in your way?" In reorientation we focus on selected areas, concentrate on goal setting, and implement a plan of action. Encouragement and role-playing new behaviors are included.

Dinkmeyer, Pew & Dinkmeyer (1979) note that interpretation creates insight into: (1) the lifestyle, (2) the current psychological movement, and its directions, (3) goals, purposes and intentions, and (4) one's private logic and how it works. They suggest that a systematic Adlerian summary should include (1) what produces the feelings of deficiency-problem areas, (2) directions taken to overcome the perceived deficiency; (3) the relationship between such direction and cooperative social interest; (4) specific life-task areas of difficulty; (5) how the person may be avoiding resolving the problem areas; (6) how one arranges to feel superior while still avoiding confrontation of problems and (7) what in a persons's past is a possible contributing influence.

F. *Life Style Summary Matrix*. Data from the family constellation and the ER's are combined into a format which focuses attention on three key statements of a life style analysis. The crucial statements are, "I am . . . , they are . . . , and life is . . ." — based upon the three "life tasks" of love, work, and friendship. (See Dreikurs, 1953.)

As a method of systematizing a succinct life style summary, we have devised the following "Life Style Summary Matrix." The vertical variables include the three life tasks of love, work, and friendship. The horizontal var-

ables are the personal “I am — others are — life is” themes. Such a chart makes it possible to compare the three life tasks for all three reference groups. The following sample life style summary is taken from *Life Style, What It Is and How To Do It* (Eckstein, Baruth and Mahrer, 1978).

## **Love**

### I AM

I may not trust my own capabilities in a love relationship. I am attractive, strong, cooperative, considerate, and kind. I tend to lean toward a series of relationships rather than a commitment to one person over a period of time. I am attracted by traditional women and shun the “liberated,” aggressive female.

### OTHERS ARE

Females are conforming, intelligent, good grade getters, having a more passive orientation to life. They do what is expected of them. (In such a situation, which might be construed as discouraging, love might not flourish. Love is an active state with two people participating fully).

### LIFE IS

Life is a place where I don't lead. However, I do expect a co-equal relationship with men and women engaged in traditional sex-stereotyped functions. Each sex will contribute different expertise to the work situation. In most situations my hard work and cooperative nature will allow me to be the center of attention at times. Good feelings will predominate in this situation.

## **Friendship**

### I AM

I am covertly rebellious of authority outside of the home. I am cooperative and don't feel the need to be the center of attention in situations where I perceive a co-equal relationship with others. I am considerate and sensitive, a “one-of-the-gang” type. I will not allow others to push me around.

### OTHERS ARE

Others are helpful and playful in recreational situations. Authority can be

critical even in friendship interactions. It is difficult to be friends with those in authority, for they often make unfair rules and punish me unjustly.

## LIFE IS

Life is a place where authority is to be challenged. I don't question my behavior closely enough to do the right thing all of the time. Safety and belongingness is found within the group.

## Summary

Gushurst (1971) reminds us that "A lifestyle must be able to recognize patterns; he must learn to note that certain traits, because of an inner logic or necessity, tend to cohere." At the same time, however, for every individual there is a unique answer as to the lifestyle question: "What is the direction of movement?" As Adler (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956) notes; "Whatever the chosen direction, behind it is the opinion of life and the style of living."

There are many practical applications relating to lifestyle analysis. In the counseling enterprise the lifestyle analysis may be used in individual and group settings as professionals work with delinquency, marital dissatisfaction, neurotic symptomology, underachieving students, vocational adjustment, anxiety, and a plethora of concerns of individuals in developmental programming.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize that *everyone* has a unique style, and that the style *per se* does not in itself denote pathology. It is the same lifestyle which carries us to the "heights of happiness" as well as to the "depths of despair." For example, a need for special recognition can motivate one to accomplish many socially useful activities (writing, research, athletics, etc.), but in a small group the same need for undue attention could lead to disfunctional behaviors such as competing, dominating, etc.

But, through insight and behavioral revisions, positive change is possible. As Eckstein (1976) has indicated, even early recollections can change as a result of counseling or therapy. Thus, a lifestyle is optimistic that constructive personal growth is always possible.

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*Probably the most neglected friend you have is you.*

— L. Ron Hubbard

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