

# Steve: A Case Study Using Adlerian Concepts in College Counseling

*Joseph L. Hart*  
St. Michael's College  
Winooski, Vt.

The following report of short-term counseling for a college freshman is presented because of a side effect that resulted when the student was confronted with the hidden logic of his private goals. The welcome side effect was the allaying of his disturbing fear that a serious, but unconscious, maladjustment was causing actions beyond his control. Steve was helped by the fundamental Adlerian technique of imparting necessary self-knowledge (Dreikurs, 1967).

## **Background**

The student's first appointment at the college counseling center was made by his residence-hall advisor. The advisor reported a growing animosity toward Steve among his fellow students in the dormitory. Steve was contributing to this dislike by his boisterous mannerisms, his tendency to dominate conversations by bragging and probably lying about himself, and by his much publicized periods of melancholy. During the latter, Steve would roam corridors and lounges seeking sympathy for a broken heart— his high-school girlfriend had jilted him during the summer.

The advisor also reported that the dormitory had recently suffered a series of thefts of personal belongings from students' rooms and that the previous week Steve reported his two best sports jackets as stolen from his closet. Some details in Steve's report made the advisor suspicious and he searched Steve's room, with Steve present, the following day. The two sports jackets were found in a small trunk under his bed. Steve at first claimed someone must be playing a trick on him, but he later admitted that he had taken the jackets from his closet, hidden them in the locker, and reported them as stolen. He did not "know why" he had acted in such a way.

## **Counseling Procedure**

Steve was a willing and articulate client. His counselor (the author) had previously employed the client-centered counseling procedures of the Rogerians (Rogers, 1951) and had only recently begun using Adlerian techniques. Early recollections were elicited to obtain some insight into his life style (Adler, 1956)

and they revealed that Steve always wanted to be the center of attention. The following early recollection contains the theme present in others:

I can remember the time I sprained my ankle. I was in the garden with my sister while mother was working in a flower bed. I must have just seen a movie or TV show about Superman or some other character who flew through the air because I got up on the highest point of the stone wall determined to fly, too. I yelled, "Hey, Ma, look at me" and when she did I jumped, arms flailing, and whamo, hit the ground and turned my ankle pretty bad.

Steve was first confronted with the "Hey, everybody, look at me" attitude prevalent in his early recollections and he responded with the instantaneous recognition reflex of genuine laughter. The purpose of his recent actions and how these experiences fit into his life style were disclosed in further interviews during which he was also encouraged to return to more useful forms of utilizing his behavior.

### **Steve's Purpose**

Steve is an intelligent young man, basically honest, open and direct. His high school record was above average academically and contained good references from high school personnel. He had been a star on the school's swimming team and had been elected to positions of responsibility by his neighborhood teen group; he had been close to the center of attention as a successful student, a good athlete, and an elected officer. In college, however, he met stiffer competition in the classroom, few cared about his earlier swimming meet records and he had no girl to call his own. Lacking these previously successful attainments, he turned to less acceptable forms of behavior to again be first in the eyes of his peers.

Steve could well serve as an illustration of Dreikurs' (1953) comments in his chapter on fictive goals where he states: "An individual may consider being the first as essential for maintaining any position in the group. If he has the chance to be first in class, he may study hard to maintain this position. If unable to do so in a higher school of learning, he may switch to another activity in which he still can succeed over all others."

### **Conclusion**

Reports from the dormitory indicated some improvement in relations between Steve and his fellow students, but his academic work definitely improved. In an interview shortly before the end of the school year the counselor commented to Steve that he seemed much calmer than he had earlier in the semester. He agreed with this and said that the sports jacket incident really had him worried although, at the time of our earlier interviews, he knew he pretended to make light of it. He said he was very worried because (to paraphrase his comments): "I didn't know what was wrong with me down deep,

inside, you know, what unconscious something made me do it. But when you know it was just a childish trick to get the attention of the other guys, you don't worry quite as much; you just have to decide to grow up. For a while, though, I was really scared that something was way off kilter ”

The popularization of drive psychology with its hidden and unconscious determinants of behavior probably causes others considerable concern, as it did Steve. The fear that their true motivations are hidden in a mysterious unattainable part of their psyche is disturbing and disabling. To confront the client with his own life-style's goals and convictions is therapeutic and educational in itself, but an important side effect may well be the allaying of such disturbing fears as Steve experienced.

## REFERENCES

- Adler, A. *The individual psychology of Alfred Adler*. Ed. by H. L. and Rowena R. Ansbacher. New York: Basic Books, 1956.
- Dreikurs, R. *Fundamentals of adlerian psychology*. Chicago: Alfred Adler Institute, 1953.
- Dreikurs, R. *Psychodynamics, psychotherapy, and counseling*. Chicago: Alfred Adler Institute, 1967.
- Rogers, C. *Client-centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951.