

ADLER'S PLACE TODAY IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MEMORY*

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A. Introduction.

The progress of science is characterized by the formulation of theories on the basis of controlled or uncontrolled observations. The theory suggests further controlled observations which in turn lead to its confirmation, modification, or rejection. The present paper is concerned with Alfred Adler's theory of memory and its position today in the light of subsequent research. Adler's views relate specifically to (1) the dynamics of recall in general and (2) the significance of earliest childhood recollections. This is in accord with his interest in the idiographic rather than the nomothetic problems of psychology, i.e., the problems concerned with the understanding of some particular event in a particular individual rather than those concerned with the finding of general laws. (4, p. 22) We shall see that Adler's views have stood the test of later investigations.

For our discussion it will be desirable to contrast Adler's views with those of Freud because the confusion of their theories today is great. It has become quite general usage to call any form of depth-psychology Psychoanalysis, including Adler's Individual Psychology; such usage is comparable to the error often committed naively in calling any camera a Kodak, any refrigerator a Frigidaire. The result is that statements such as the following from a recent college textbook of applied psychology can be found: "One of the benefits that has come from psychoanalysis sponsored by Freud, Jung, Adler, and others, is the emphasis placed on the pervasiveness of sex." (7, p. 106)

B. The dynamics of recall.

On the general mechanism of recall Adler wrote: "The functions of memory...are dominated by the necessity of adaptation. Without memories it would be impossible to exercise any precaution for the future. We may deduce that all recollections have an unconscious purpose within themselves. They are not fortuitous phenomena, but speak clearly the language of encouragement and warning. There are no indifferent or nonsensical recollections.... We remember those events whose recollection is important for a specific psychic tendency [attitude], because these recollections further an important underlying movement. We forget likewise all those events which detract from the fulfillment of a

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plan.... Every memory is dominated by the goal idea which directs the personality-as-a-whole." (1, pp. 48-49) The implications of this statement are clear. If our tendency is to move towards an object, the recollections will be encouraging; if the underlying attitude is one of withdrawal, the recollections will sound a warning. Thus pleasant or unpleasant, positively or negatively toned memories may dominate the scene, depending entirely on the situation. This is expressed further in the following: "Out of the incalculable number of impressions which meet an individual, he chooses to remember only those which he feels, however darkly, to have a bearing on his situation. Thus his memories represent his 'Story of My Life'; a story he repeats to himself to warn him or comfort him, to keep him concentrated on his goal, to prepare him, by means of past experiences, to meet the future with an already tested style of action. The use of memories to stabilize a mood can be plainly seen in everyday life. If a man suffers a defeat and is discouraged by it, he recalls previous instances of defeat.... When he is cheerful and courageous, he selects quite other memories.... Memories thus serve much the same purpose as dreams. A melancholic could not remain melancholic if he remembered his good moments and his successes.... Memories can never run counter to the style of life." (2, pp. 73-74)

This view is quite divergent from Freud's. Although Freud very definitely appreciated that the "child no less than the adult retains in memory what is important" (14, p. 178), he was from the start more interested in forgetting than in remembering and postulated that "the forgetting in all cases is proved to be founded on a motive of displeasure." (16, p. 96) This is the theory of the repression of the unpleasant which "is the pillar upon which the edifice of psychoanalysis rests." (15, p. 939)* Freud's contention was tested by psychological research in many dozens of studies, as surveyed by Meltzer (20), Cason (8), Gilbert (17), and Barrett (5). Most of the studies showed that the majority of subjects tended to forget the unpleasant, but a number of questions remained unanswered. Among these the most important one to our

*To be sure Freud eventually went beyond the pleasure principle by introducing the life and the death instincts, the purpose of the former being the maintenance of the life of the individual and species. But these concepts have remained enigmatic to psychologists ever since they were proposed. Symonds (22, p. 31n) in his recent book states that he could find no evidence for these instincts as psychological forces. We believe that this conclusion is based on the most careful and sincere investigation of all possible evidence. Among psychoanalysts as well the concept of the death instinct seems still to be offering difficulties. For example Simmel (21) replaces Freud's dualism with new theoretical constructs. He finds our lives governed by an erotic instinct of love with the ultimate aim of preserving the race, and a destructive devouring instinct of hatred, with the aim of preserving the self. This would seem a quite radical departure from Freud in this respect and a moderate approximation to Adler's "social interest" and "striving for superiority."

way of thinking was: "What individual differences...are correlated with the tendency of some individuals to forget the unpleasant more than others?" (17, p. 33) According to Adler, of course, the pleasant-versus-unpleasant issue is the outcome of a faulty formulation of the problem; depending on the individual case, unpleasant memories might be very necessary while pleasant ones might be disturbing. The entire issue needed redirection of emphasis as expressed by Meltzer who realized that pleasant and unpleasant memories must be correlated with other significant measurable factors. (20, p. 137)

The problem was reformulated in 1938 by Barrett who on the basis of very careful experimental research offered the following theory: "A prevailing attitude, which is pleasant for most of the individuals, is in part responsible for the relatively better memory of the pleasant items of experience, as reported in some current investigations. When circumstances are such as to foster an unpleasant frame of mind, one would expect more unpleasant items to be remembered." (5, p. 53) The following may serve as an example of Barrett's type of work. She read to 30 subjects in individual sessions a statement such as "He didn't mean to make work for his wife, but time and time again he'd tramp across the newly scrubbed floors in his muddy boots." This was followed by the reading of the 10 adjectives: honest, cruel, perverse, responsible, truthful, thoughtless, congenial, impudent, dependable, discourteous. Eighteen to forty-eight hours later 29 of the 30 subjects recalled more unpleasant adjectives, the one remaining subject recalling an equal number of pleasant and unpleasant adjectives. The subjects had had no knowledge that there was to be a memory experiment following the reading of the statement and the adjectives.

In 1941 Edwards formulated practically the same hypothesis independently. He said: "Experiences which harmonize with an existing frame of reference will tend to be learned and remembered better than experiences which conflict with the same frame of reference." (12, p. 36 & 13) His evidence came from the field of social psychology. He compared, for example, the retention of Pro and Anti New Deal material for subjects with Pro and Anti New Deal attitudes and found in all cases significantly greater recall for material compatible with the subject's attitudes than for material which was incompatible. Edwards goes on to discuss the Freudian theory of recall and to show that Freud himself was not as dogmatic regarding the hedonic theory of recall as the experimentalists have taken him to be. Freud limited his theory of repression by stating "the defense against painful associations plays a certain part but is far from explaining everything," (14, p. 68); and he was also well aware of the fact that often "it is just that which is painful which it is hard to forget." But Freud's resolution of this apparent contradiction does not take us far when he says: "Evidence of one particular tendency does not in the least preclude its opposite; there is room for both of them. The material questions are: How do these opposites stand to one another and what effects proceed from one of them and what from the other?" (14, p. 68) We feel that the research psychologists cannot be blamed for having first tackled those aspects on which Freud expressed

himself definitely, leaving aside those on which he offered no clear solution.

A third line of research which is relevant here is represented by the classical experimental study on memory by Bartlett (6). In the many thousands of cases of remembering which he collected, he found that literal recall was altogether very rare. "Remembering appears to be far more decisively an affair of construction rather than one of mere reproduction." (6, p. 205) "The construction that is effected is the sort of construction that would justify the observer's 'attitude.' Attitude...is...very largely a matter of feeling, or affect. We say that it is characterized by doubt, hesitation, surprise, astonishment, confidence, dislike, repulsion, and so on.... The recall is then a construction, made largely on the basis of this attitude, and its general effect is that of a justification of the attitude." (6, pp. 206-207) From this Bartlett concludes: What we remember is "apt to take on a peculiarity of some kind which, in any given case, expresses the temperament, or the character, of the person who effects the recall." (6, p. 213) The final paragraph of Bartlett's work describes memory as a tool for the attainment of certain ends, much as Adler might have done. "I have regarded memory as one achievement in the line of the ceaseless struggle to master and enjoy a world full of variety and rapid change. Memory...is one with the age-old acquisition of distance senses, and with the development of constructive imagination and constructive thought where at length we find the most complete release from the narrowness of presented time and place." (6, p. 314)

Last but not least the important experiments of the 1920's by Lewin and Zeigarnik (23) and other Gestalt psychologists must be mentioned here. These led Köhler to the conclusion that reproduction is restricted mainly to those cases "in which it has a value with respect to the actual total field and its dynamical development as a functional whole." (18, p. 343)

The four more or less independent series of research just outlined are all in accordance with Adler and lead to the conclusion that today Adler's theory of the dynamics of recall can be considered a basically well-established fact and that more and more evidence seems to be piling up in its confirmation.

C. The significance of earliest childhood recollections.

Adler's view on earliest recollections is expressed succinctly in the following: "Early recollections have special significance.... They show the style of life in its origins and in its simplest expressions.... What is of most value about them is that they represent the individual's judgment, 'Even in childhood, I was such and such a person,' or, 'Even in childhood, I found the world like this.' Most illuminating of all is... the earliest incident he can recall. The first memory will show the individual's fundamental view of life; his first satisfactory crystallization of his attitude." The earliest recollections offer the following two advantages for personality assessment: (1) "In the main, people are perfectly willing to discuss their first memories. They take them as mere

facts, and do not realize the meaning hidden in them." (2) The compression and simplicity of first memories "allows us to use them for mass investigations.... It is comparatively indifferent whether the memories are accurate or inaccurate." (2, pp. 74-75).

As in the case of general recall, Freud's view on the present point differed from Adler's by accentuating the negative. He was interested in amnesia of childhood by which he meant "that the first years of life, up to the age of five, six, or eight, have not left the same traces in memory as our later experiences." Although there are exceptions "it is incomparably more common for the opposite, a blank in memory, to be found." Such amnesia tends to result from the repression of infantile sexual impulses and it is "a regular task in psychoanalytic treatment to fill in the blanks in infantile memories." Yet in spite of infantile amnesia "certain clearly retained recollections emerge." These appear "often so banal and meaningless in themselves that we can only ask ourselves why just this particular detail has escaped oblivion.... That what is important is represented (by the process of condensation and, more especially, of displacement) in memory by something apparently trivial. For this reason I have called these childhood recollections screen memories." (14, pp. 177-178) "The 'childhood reminiscences' of individuals altogether advance to the significance of 'concealing [or screen] memories.'" (16, p. 65) "The meagre childish recollections which people have always, long before analysis, consciously preserved, can be falsified...or at least can contain a generous admixture of truth and falsehood.... Phantasy and reality are to be treated alike and...it is...of no account whether the childhood experiences under consideration belong to one class or to the other." (14, pp. 321-322) These concealing or screen memories can be interpreted only in the light of a complete psychoanalysis. "Owing to the previously discussed nature of the relations of the childhood reminiscences to later life, it becomes extraordinarily difficult to report such examples. For, in order to attach the value of the concealing memory to an infantile reminiscence, it would be often necessary to present the entire life-history of the person concerned." (16, p. 65)

In comparing Adler and Freud we may say that (1) they agree (a) in ascribing importance to the early childhood recollections, (b) in considering it comparatively indifferent whether the early childhood memories correspond to actual fact or not. (2) They disagree in that (a) Adler sees no particular difficulty in their interpretation whereas Freud does; (b) Adler considers the earliest incident one can recall as particularly illuminating, which Freud never pointed out; (c) Freud stresses infantile amnesia, which Adler never mentions, and is primarily interested in those infantile experiences that come to the fore only during a psychoanalysis.

Research in childhood memories has been undertaken since 1895 as pointed out in a review by Dudycha and Dudycha (11) which covers the literature up to 1940. No further reports of studies in this field have become known since then. The papers were interested primarily in accuracy of the memories; average age of earliest memories; sex differences; sense modalities represented in the memories; emotions attached

to the memories; relation of age of earliest memory to intelligence and language development; and racial differences. Several studies were related to the hedonic tone of the earliest memories and led to conclusions similar to those reported for hedonic tone and recall in general. The common characteristic for practically all these studies was that they took memory per se, separately from attitudes and personality, and were satisfied with making some contribution to general developmental psychology, but did not tackle the problem of the significance of the memories for the individual who produced them.

Only two published studies have dealt with early recollections in relation to dynamic factors of individual personalities and both aimed at the testing of certain implications from Freudian theory. The first study by Crook and Harden (10) was designed to test the hypothesis that infantile amnesia is positively correlated with neuroticism. Since, according to Freud, the childhood screen memories are in themselves quite meaningless, the authors could well dispense with having the content of the memories noted. They merely required the subjects to indicate the number of their memories before the age of six by marking crosses on a chart. The chart listed the various age levels up to six, and the crosses were to be placed opposite the age level to which the memory could be assigned; thus the earliest age for any memory of an individual could also be determined. A relatively small number of crosses and a late earliest memory were taken as an indication of amnesia, hence of repression, hence of neuroticism. When the authors correlated number of memories and age of earliest memory with scores on the Pressey X-O test of neuroticism, they actually did find that the more emotionally stable an individual is "the greater the number of memories he retains from the first six years of his life, and the earlier the age from which he retains the first memory." However, the number of subjects was only 19 and the correlations were statistically not reliable. Therefore Child (9) repeated the study with 290 college students. Although his correlations pointed towards confirmation of the original assumptions, they were very small and did not deviate significantly from zero, so that Child concludes that "no significant association obtains between the purported measures of degree of infantile amnesia and of degree of neuroticism." But Child believed that the original assumptions were dubious deductions from psychoanalytic theory and that therefore "the findings may not be taken at present as evidence against any psychoanalytic postulates."

Although specifically suggested by Adler (2, p. 75), no research based on the Adlerian theory of earliest recollections is known to us. We began such a study a year ago; the work is still in progress, but first results from 271 male college students are available. The procedure consisted of two parts: (1) A simple questionnaire was administered, the main item of which was the completion of the statement "My earliest childhood recollection is...." The preceding instructions stressed to write down the earliest incident that comes to mind and not to worry whether this is actually the earliest memory or not. (2) The first 25 items from the Maslow Security-Insecurity Test (19) were administered.

The test is designed to fit the following definitions of insecurity: feeling of rejection, of isolation, uniqueness; perception of the world as dangerous, of other human beings as essentially bad; feelings of threat, mistrust, shame, guilt; tendency to pessimism, unhappiness. Security is defined as: feeling of being liked, belonging, safety, friendliness, calm; perception of the world as pleasant, of other human beings as essentially good; tendency toward optimism, happiness, self-acceptance; "social interest" in the Adlerian sense.

The specific purpose of the study was to see if any relationship could be established between security scores and certain types of memories. The findings are in brief:

(I) Subjects who remember themselves as participating in group activities, as being active in general, as being treated kindly by others (88 subjects or 33 per cent of the total group) have more frequently high security scores than not.

(II) Subjects who remember themselves as cut off from the larger group, as getting or losing prestige, as having done something bad; or who remember others receiving kindness and attention, or suffering harm, or inflicting harm on one another (54 subjects or 20 per cent of the total group) have practically always low security scores.

(III) Recollections of sickness, accidents, interference from other people are not related to security feeling, but tend to occur more frequently in subjects in the middle of the security range than near either extreme (83 subjects, 30 per cent of the group). A small number of miscellaneous recollections are included here.

(IV) Recollections of inactivity, contemplation, fear, and of witnessing disaster (46 subjects, 17 per cent of the group) are of ambiguous significance in that they are found slightly more often with very high or very low rather than with middle-range security scores.

Contrary to expectations, recollections of receiving presents, a subgroup of 17 cases, were practically always found among the upper 40 per cent of security scores and were thus included in Group I. Some examples are: When my father gave me and my brother a watch chain; when my father gave me a pony; my mother had bought me a new pair of shoes; getting a train for Christmas; a lady came up and handed me a little toy dog. Apparently such recollections signify a generalized attitude of "people are good to me, the world is a relatively good place."

Another somewhat unexpected finding is the relationship to security scores of recollections concerned with harm suffered by others. There were only five recollections in this sub-group but all were found among the lower 40 per cent in security. They are: When my brother broke his arm; an accident my mother encountered; seeing my sister fall and cut her leg; my older brother fell from the attic; seeing a window cleaner fall from the third floor. Such recollections apparently stand as a warning that "the world is dangerous, and I had better stay on the side lines lest I also be drawn into the maelstrom." The groups and sub-groups which emerged from this study are, by and large, in amazing

agreement with some indications given by Adler (3), although the present author was not aware of Adler's suggested categories at the time he developed his own.

This study by no means exhausts the significance of earliest recollections. Clinical examination of each case would undoubtedly uncover a wealth of further relationships as would also greater refinement of our categories. But the study does show that even relatively crude means such as ours yield quantitative results from a normal population, which are basically in accord with the Adlerian theory of early recollections. On the other hand, if childhood memories were "concealing" in the Freudian sense, it is not likely that any relationships could have been demonstrated, inasmuch as "concealing" memories are in themselves quite meaningless, being symbols for infantile repressions which, in turn, can only be uncovered during a thorough psychoanalysis.

D. Summary.

In an attempt to find Alfred Alder's place today in the psychology of memory we have arrived at the following conclusions:

1. His view that it is underlying attitudes (or goals as he expressed it) which largely determine individual recall has been substantiated by numerous important research.

2. His view that early childhood recollections are particularly expressive of an individual's basic attitude toward life has been tentatively substantiated by some preliminary research.

3. By contrast, Freudian theory regarding the same problems, tied in firmly as it is with the concept of repression, stands today without sound support from research data, in spite of a great deal of effort on the part of academic psychologists.

As an additional, summarizing comment, may we say that Adler was able to formulate these partial theories from his basic holistic view of the individual, a view which is increasingly being shared by all biological and social sciences.

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