

EARLY RECOLLECTIONS:  
EVALUATION OF SOME RECENT RESEARCH

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In this paper we shall direct our attention to four recent psychoanalytically-oriented research studies by Robert J. Langs and his co-workers (9, 10, 11, 13). Our purpose will be to summarize this work, and view its findings from an Adlerian orientation.

Two methods of psychodiagnosis have been most closely identified with the name of Adler: the analysis of the family constellation or birth order, or what Murphy (19) calls "positional psychology"; and the interpretation of early recollections (ERs) which Munroe appropriately recognized as "the first approach toward the projective methodology now so widely used" (18, p. 428n), a theme upon which the author has previously elaborated (15).

What has consistently distinguished Adlerian from Freudian theory concerning ERs, and this is equally true of dream interpretation, is the temporal orientation. Freudian psychology, with its archaeological excursions into the past, conceptualizes the ER as a screen memory, covering up a more highly emotionally charged, repressed incident (5). Adlerian psychology relates ERs to a current apperceptive posture, part of the individual life style (1, 2, 3, 15). In Freudian terms, the Adlerian approach would deal with the manifest content of the ER, the Freudian approach, with the latent content. Consequently, Freudians would be interested in the repressive mechanism through the ER, while Adlerians are interested in the here-and-now individual.

A second distinction originates in the opposing models of man of the two systems—the atomistic versus the holistic. The former, Freudian, model necessitates relating psychoanalytic research to the tripartite topology of id-ego-superego. It requires fractionating the ER into component parts and then describing and counting these (20). With its emphasis on the individual as "indivisible," the Adlerian model conceptualizes the ER as a creation of the individual rather than as a compromise formation between competing, antagonistic psychic substructures. With this approach the ER is studied in its totality as a conveyer of a message reflecting the individual's life style.

Yet, the holistic position does not preclude directing the interpreter's attention to the details of the recollection. On the contrary, as Adler wrote:

We can begin wherever we choose: every expression will lead us in the same direction—towards the one motive, the one melody, around which the personality is built . . . Any mistake we might make in considering one expression too hastily can be checked and corrected by a thousand other expressions. We cannot finally decide the meaning of one expression until we can see its part in the whole; but every expression is saying the same thing (2, p. 71).

### SCORING METHOD

The first paper by Langs *et al.*, on "A Method for Clinical and Theoretical Study of Earliest Memories" (13) has a dual purpose: it focuses on *a Manual for the Scoring of Earliest Memories* (12); and it presents a pilot study "as a vehicle for the description of the Manual" (13, p. 525). A discussion of the differences in the above approaches forms the introduction, followed by a review of the experimental approaches to ERs. It is pointed out that since screen memories are best understood in the context of the psychoanalytic therapy setting, they are less feasible for systematic study than are "revealing memories." This term is used as a synonym for manifest content: "What was revealed [in previous studies] included important aspects of the individual's personality, perception of the world, and his ways of dealing with this world," for which concept reference is made to Adler (13, p. 523). While Langs professes throughout a psychoanalytic preference, the studies covered here are limited to manifest content.

The pilot study utilizes the Manual as a scoring scheme to determine whether the ERs of a group of 10 women hysterics differed from those of a matched group of paranoid schizophrenics. The memories were scored independently by three scorers without knowledge of the patients aside from their sex. Through conferences a consensus was reached on all items scored, which scores were then used in the study. Unanimous agreement before conference among all three scorers averaged 77.1%.

The findings are that the ERs of hysteric women tended "to be grossly traumatic with themes of punishment and illness common" (13, p. 531); to be action oriented; and to evidence concern with body parts, clothing, and appearance, rejection, and moral issues. The most striking difference from paranoid schizophrenic women was that the latter exhibited lack of interaction between persons. Their memory-

content tended toward the ideational rather than actionful, and was thematically centered about happy occasions. But the number of patients in each group was small ( $N = 10$ ), and the frequency of almost all content items even smaller.

The researchers concluded that "such manifest material is psychologically important and useful" and that the data obtained "are related to clinical diagnosis in a gross manner" (13, p. 531). These conclusions would be in support of the Adlerian position, and away from the emphasis on screen memories. However, we cannot accept them because they are based on very few cases, and most comparisons are not statistically significant.

Since the primary goal of this study was to test out the scoring method, what can be said for its value? Adlerian content analysis of ERs has been scant, and this constitutes a serious shortcoming in the understanding both of ERs and of the people who produce them. Would the categories of an Adlerian manual differ from the one of Langs, and if so, how? The difficulty in any such categorization is that in satisfying the requirements of objective research, one risks losing the phenomenology of the individual, his biased apperception, which constitutes so much of the life style, or "cognitive style" (see below). Whereas the Manual does include items of mood, sensory modalities, and feeling tone, it is not clear how these are used in the tables given. For instance, the theme "happy occasions" is used to include birthdays. If a birthday party has been recalled as embarrassing, or otherwise unpleasant, is it still listed under "happy occasions"? And if not, under what category would it be listed? More work will have to be done before such important nuances of ERs can be accurately recorded, as Langs et al. would agree. They say, from the psychoanalytic point of view, "certainly, without associative comments, the idiosyncratic aspects of the memory, such as the special significance of a given person, cannot be understood" (9, p. 389).

#### PREDICTIVE STUDY

Langs' second paper (9) extends ER research into the area of prediction—from first memory to personality. Excluding studies which are devoted to description, classification, and validity, research has generally centered about postdiction. A study by McCarter, Tomkins, and Schiffman (14) found that performance of the Tomkins-Horn Picture Arrangement Test was to a considerable degree successfully predicted from ERs; and Mosak (16) described the use of

ERs to predict the relationship of the patient to the therapist, but his method has never been subjected to experimental or formal clinical test. Thus Langs' study is something of a pioneer effort in formal prediction from ERs.

The conceptual framework for his study recognizes the ERs are a "concentrated expression of cognitive style" (9, p. 379). In Langs' psychoanalytic terminology this includes, "the precipitates of drives; superego promptings; and ego functioning, particularly defensive operations and modes of adaptation; and the person's view of reality and the self" (9, p. 379). This comprehensive list would seem to cover the whole way of an individual's functioning from the Freudian frame of reference, but otherwise has little in common with the Adlerian concept of life style.

ERs from 48 men were scored, as in the first research of Langs. For the 60 items selected for study, two major groupings were made: population counts (10 items), direct counts of the persons present in the memory in respect to sex, age, family status, etc.; and complex and thematic items (50 items) such as roles, perceptions of the environment, etc. Each *S* was scored for the presence or absence of each item. Each *S*'s personality assessment consisted of a rating on 76 personality variables selected from personal interview, Rorschach, Thematic Apperception Test, Wechsler-Bellevue, and autobiography. Predictions of the personality correlates of the ER scores were significantly more often correct than expected by chance alone.

In a subsequent exploratory study, *post hoc* correlations between all 60 memory variables and the 76 personality variables were made, as well as intercorrelations among the memory variables. These correlations were frequently greater than expected by chance. Specific findings are given in relation to 22 ER themes. Altogether there were 773 predictions and 4,560 intercorrelations, indicating the scope of Langs' study.

The findings are undeniably positive, as we would have anticipated from the basic assumption regarding revealing memories. Thus, in spite of differences in terminology and interpretation, there is much which will be of great interest to Adlerians who have never applied such a quantitative approach. For example, Langs found a positive relationship between the "traumatic grouping" of ER themes of illness, damage, and conflict and low self-esteem, poor attitudes toward work and responsibility, homosexual trends, manipulative attitudes, acting out, and projection as prominent defenses (9, p.

380). This finding would certainly be meaningful for Adlerians who use most—if not all—of these descriptive terms, and are familiar with this general personality syndrome.

Again, Langs found that ERs with content of anal derivatives correlate with “demandingness and hostility, thrift, and the use of isolation and intellectualization as defenses” (9, p. 388). The category of anal derivatives is explained as including references to cleanliness, dirt, thrift, and money. Accepting these contents of ERs as themes which can often be observed, but rejecting the interpretive cover-term, we should find this correlation of interest to Adlerians, and not surprising.

A few predictions are based on exclusively psychoanalytic interpretations, e. g., “vehicles were also considered in their phallic symbolic aspects” (9, p. 384), an assumption which Mosak and Todd (17) found untenable. But Langs does state that “the main thesis of this report lies not in the specific findings, which must be subjected to confirmation, but in the general hypothesis [which appears strongly confirmed] that the manifest content of the first memory is predictive of, and has a broad relationship to, personality” (9, p. 389). This is sufficiently supportive of the Adlerian position.

#### CHARACTEROLOGIC DIAGNOSIS

Langs' third study (10), the briefest of the four, takes its place as one of several attempts by investigators of diverse orientations to correlate ERs and clinical diagnoses. Thus his references could have included several additional studies (4, 6, 7, 8). Langs compares ER scores of four diagnostic groups—obsessive-compulsive ( $N = 12$ ), inhibited obsessive-compulsive ( $N = 14$ ), hysteric ( $N = 9$ ), and narcissistic ( $N = 13$ ), all males. He finds confirmation for his hypothesis that ER scores are reflective of characterologic diagnosis, although of 28 chi-squares only 8 are significant at the .05 level or better.

The most significant results were that ERs of obsessive-compulsives showed a paucity of people, and low degree of activity for the  $\mathcal{S}$  and others. Inhibited obsessive-compulsives showed significant traumatic and destructive content. Although we would not concur with the statement, “Structurally, character refers to facets of the relationship between id, superego and ego elements and their crystallization in a relatively permanent style of adaptation and identity,” we regard as supportive of our position the conclusion that ERs are

“reflective and predictive of current functioning and personality” (10, p. 320).

### LSD-25 EFFECTS

In his most recent paper Langs (11) investigates a hypothesis which Adlerians accept as an article of faith—the stability of ERs—inasmuch as ERs reflect the individual's life style which is also held to be relatively stable. Only when the life style is altered, as for example in psychotherapy, are ERs assumed to change (15). The stability of ERs under ordinary conditions has been reported by Winthrop (21). But Langs' interest here is in stability or change under LSD-25. His *Ss* were the same 48 males of the previous study, 28 of whom were given the drug, and 20, a placebo.

Langs' main hypothesis was that the drug will have a regressive effect upon the report of the ERs, an effect distinguishable from that of a placebo. Two supplementary hypotheses were (*a*) that regressive changes occur only in certain *Ss*, related to personality; and (*b*) that the changes will be related to a strong drug effect.

The first finding was that 60% of the drug *Ss* and only 40% of the placebo *Ss* had stable single ERs. Entirely new ERs were given by 20% drug and 30% placebo *Ss*, while new ERs with mention of former ERs were given by the remaining 20% drug and 30% placebo *Ss*. If this low stability comes as a surprise to Adlerians, it should be pointed out that it may, to an unknown extent, have been induced by the experimental instructions. When the *Ss* returned for the stability test the following day, they were specifically told “to disregard the recall of the previous day and to reply directly to the present inquiry” (11, p. 172). These instructions may well have suggested the report of new ERs.

The hypotheses regarding regressive ER changes were considered confirmed. *Ss* who regressively changed their ER under LSD tended to be schizoid. LSD only constricts or does not affect ERs of “impulsive, rigid, guarded, and inhibited obsessive persons who mostly show a minimal reaction to the drug” (11, p. 184). In the placebo *Ss*, ER changes showed no relationship to personality make-up, “do not tend to be regressive and seem, instead, to reflect a search for readily available, alternate recollections” (11, p. 184).

What these findings could mean to Adlerians is not clear. To them the issue would be whether the *message* conveyed, and not the ER itself, is changed. To clarify this issue would take more careful study

of Langs' data, or possibly further studies. Furthermore, although this investigation addresses itself to ERs, it is equally noteworthy for the questions it raises with respect to the effects of LSD, but these are outside the scope of this review.

#### SUMMARY

The studies of Langs *et al.* represent the first large-scale, precise research on ERs. They constitute an important contribution and demonstrate convincingly that such topics as ER lend themselves to quantitative investigation. Although the approach of this research is psychoanalytic, this does not influence its methods or findings. In his discussions Langs interprets ERs as "derivative of latent content" (9, p. 390). But his data, nevertheless, consist exclusively of manifest content, and his results show simply that "such memories are reflective and predictive of current functioning and personality" (10, p. 320). Such results can be welcomed equally by Adlerians and others who are nonpsychoanalytically oriented. The hypotheses explored in these studies, taken in themselves, are those to which Adlerians in some instances have been attending, and in others should be attending now that Langs and his co-workers have shown the way. A major weakness of Langs' studies lies with the limited data collected so far.

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(continued from page 2)

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