

LIFE STYLE ASSESSMENT: A DEMONSTRATION FOCUSED ON FAMILY CONSTELLATION^{1, 2}

HAROLD H. MOSAK, Ph.D.³

Chicago, Illinois

The phrase, life style, is currently used in many ways which Adler never intended. As Adler used it, life style refers to the "unity in each individual—in his thinking, feeling, acting; in his so-called conscious and unconscious, in every expression of his personality. This unity we call the style of life of the individual" (3, p. 175). While we agree with this definition of life style, we prefer one somewhat more limited, namely, a person's central convictions which, to oversimplify, describe how he views himself in relation to his view of life.

We formally assess a life style by interviewing the person regarding his family constellation and his early recollections, as Adler had emphasized the importance of birth order position and early recollections (3, p. 328). The family constellation part was described first by Dreikurs (4) and then by Shulman (7); the early recollections part has been described by this author (5). In an actual case we give equal importance to the two parts. In the present demonstration early recollections are merely touched upon during the last few minutes, while the emphasis is on the investigation of the family constellation. Dreikurs outlines the significance of this procedure in the following:

The family constellation is a sociogram of the group at home during the person's formative years. This investigation reveals his field of early experiences, the circumstances under which he developed his personal perspectives and biases, his concepts and convictions about himself and others, his fundamental attitudes, and his own approaches to life, which are the basis for his character, his personality (4, p. 109).

Some comments are in order regarding variations from our usual clinical procedure. At a demonstration such as the present, time is limited. Therefore, (a) we could not complete the assessment nor write the summary we ordinarily undertake in clinical practice, (b)

¹The tape of the demonstration at the Fourth Brief Psychotherapy Conference, Chicago, March 25, 1972, was not available to the author. The demonstration reported here instead, was conducted the following day before the audience at a workshop of the Alfred Adler Institute, Chicago.

²Introductory statement and comments addressed to the audience are in large type; the interview proper is in small type.

³For reprints write to the author, 2913 North Commonwealth Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, 60657.

we interpreted for the client as we proceeded whereas in actual practice the interpretive summary is postponed until data collection is complete, (c) the result is not necessarily a model of good interviewing. We also wish to mention that at a demonstration we use a blackboard to enter the main facts obtained through the interview as we go along, so that the audience may keep these before their eyes.

At the present session the client was a high school student, Ann, whom I had never met before, and about whom I did not have any information. Her high school counselor, who attended the workshop, had invited her to serve as a subject for this demonstration before an audience, and she had agreed.

At the beginning of the interview we established that Ann was 17 years old, one of five children, with an older sister, Debbie, age 19; a younger brother, Sam, age 13; and a pair of twins, Marty and Mary, age 10. One can start formulating hypotheses immediately. Thus I said, looking at this information, my best guess at this point is that Debbie, Ann and Sam form one subgroup and the twins, a second subgroup.

Dr. M.: How do you feel about this, Ann?

ANN: It's right.

Dr. M.: To confirm this, let me ask, who played with whom?

ANN: I played with Debbie. Sam usually played by himself, and Marty and Mary played together.

Here Ann may be suggesting that my guess of a two-group family was wrong, that it was actually a three-group family, 2-1-2. We shall keep this in mind and see which it might be. To help ascertain I shall ask:

Dr. M.: Who fought with each other?

ANN: Debbie and I fought constantly, and Sam and Debbie fought constantly.

Dr. M.: And who else fought?

ANN: The twins fought.

"Sam and Debbie fought constantly" would suggest that they are in the same subgroup. At this point I could ascertain more information about the subgroups, but I shall not go into that. These questions, and most of those which I shall ask can be found in the Dreikurs paper to which I have referred (4).

Regarding subgroups, psychologists have a difficult time with families beyond three children. They can more or less accurately

describe an oldest, a middle, or a youngest child; but the fourth child is not described and the fifth certainly not. However, by dividing families into subgroups of children, it is possible to determine the psychological position of each child within the family. Sometimes, just on the basis of what we have so far here on the blackboard we can already begin to formulate some hypotheses, some alternatives.

DR. M.: What kind of child was Debbie when you were growing up?

ANN: She was *very* studious all the time. . . . Well, from my point of view, she was a goody-goody. . . . It's hard to talk about your own sister.

DR. M.: Especially if you have to say such nice things about her.

ANN: No, she was *very* reliable and *very* responsible. . . . and *very* talkative.

DR. M.: Did she get into trouble at school for that?

ANN: Occasionally.

DR. M.: So, while she was a goody-goody, she still got into trouble occasionally. She wasn't quite perfect. What else was she like?

ANN: Well, she *always* tried to please my parents. And she was *very* sensitive. You know like she cried very easily. . . . that's about all.

DR. M.: I'm going to invite you, Ann, to look at all of this on the blackboard. If you had one word to describe your sister, what word would you use? Let me give you an incomplete sentence. She was . . .

ANN: Responsible, I guess.

DR. M.: That's a good word.

ANN: I can't do it in *one* word.

DR. M.: I can. Would you like to hear my one word?

ANN: Yes.

DR. M.: She was *very* . . . (*Audience laughter.*) How does that sound?

ANN: *Very* good. (*Ann and audience laughter.*)

She was not just *very* studious, but *very* studious *all* the time. She *always* tried to please the parents. Even though Ann does not use the word "very" each time, she uses it quite consistently. Even when she doesn't use it, she still describes her sister as a "very," and a "very" is *always* something positive. *Very* responsible, good-goody, *very* studious, *always* wanting to please, and so forth. It must have been a hard act to follow.

Now, one thing Adlerians observe is that when you have two children in competition (and when two children are this close in age, they generally are in competition), they operate as "teeter-totter twins." Where one succeeds, the other fails or does not even get into that area. He just decides, "The heck with it; it's really not worth it. I'm going to do something else." They carve up the territory because every child in every family, you (*to audience*), Ann, and I, is striving for significance. We want to count; we want to belong; we want to

have the feeling that people take notice of us, that we are part of it. We don't always use the best methods for gaining significance, but even sometimes with the poorest methods, people do take notice of us, as any teacher will testify. If that is the case, we can already begin to make some predictions in terms of probabilities with respect to Ann.

DR. M.: Since Debbie was "very," and "hardly ever." Let's find out, Ann, what kind of kid you were.

ANN: "Hardly ever" and not "very." (*Ann and audience laughter.*) I wasn't studious, and I wasn't a goody-goody. Well I was actually . . .

DR. M.: Very reliable? (*Traits with which she described Debbie.*)

ANN: No, I wasn't.

DR. M.: Very responsible?

ANN: No.

DR. M.: Very talkative?

ANN: No.

DR. M.: Always tried to please parents?

If you could see Ann as I can see her from this position, you would have seen the glimmer of a recognition reflex when I mentioned "always tried to please parents." And you are going to discover that she does not try to please them very much—although she wants to.

DR. M.: Right?

ANN: Right!

DR. M.: Very sensitive? Cry easily?

ANN: Yeah!

Sibling competition is one of the major factors leading to differences between children. Similarities occur in the area of the family values. A family value is one which *both* parents hold in common, and every child must take a stand, positive or negative, with respect to that particular value or behavior. You can well imagine because of the potency of the parents that most of the children will adopt positive attitudes to the parental values. If it's a family where both parents stress being good in school, all the children will do *something* about being good in school. They'll either be very good or very poor. Where the family values are not involved, the child may not take a stand at all. Consequently, one can suspect that both parents have some kind of stand in common on sensitivity, and Ann is now nodding her head, and consequently each child has to make up his mind whether he is going to be sensitive or not. It is not determined by the competition, because in terms of the competition, whatever Debbie does, Ann does the opposite.

DR. M.: Anything you want to add to just the "minuses"?

ANN: I was athletic, whereas Debbie didn't even bother with sports.

DR. M.: You were athletic and therefore Debbie was minus.

ANN: I think I was more interested—well maybe I was more generally creative than she was as a child.

You notice here the intensity of the competition. She does not merely say, I was athletic or I was creative. I was *more* creative, I was *more* athletic, which means that she grew up with one eye on her sister, watched how well her sister was doing and then compared herself to that. Since her sister was so "very," she had to feel inferior in most respects. Ann lives life *comparatively*.

DR. M.: What was Sam like?

ANN: If you want to compare him between Debbie and me, he was more like Debbie. He was a good student, but at the same time he was athletic and enjoyed sports like my parents did.

DR. M.: Both parents did? So you see we have another family value. Both parents enjoyed sports and every child is going to take a positive or negative stand on it.

ANN: He's athletic, *very* responsible for a kid his age, too, and likeable. That's about all.

That makes a good start. If you look at Sam, you will notice that he has many of the same characteristics that Debbie had, with one major exception. He's not "very." He's likeable, he's athletic, and he's a good student, but he's not "very." Only one time does she use the word "very" with respect to him. One reason that Sam could become these things is that Ann had already become discouraged and had defaulted. Therefore, he could become those things which she was not. Since Ann was a poor student, it was easy for him to become a good student, but, of course, as he became a good student, Ann found herself in the middle of a pincers movement—the two "good" ones, and herself in the middle. Not "very" good, not "very" accomplished, between two good kids! The squeeze was on. Now she said previously that Sam and Debbie fought, not Sam and she, but Sam and Debbie. And you can see the competition there, too, because Sam wanted to do the same things Debbie was doing, except she had a six-year head start. She could even like her six-year younger brother as long as he knew his place. If he occasionally decided to compete, she shoved him down.

DR. M.: What kind of boy was Sam?

ANN: Well, he was the kind of boy that I suppose any father would like.

“The kind of boy any father would like.” You see that Sam had a place merely by being a boy, so that while he competed, he didn’t *have* to compete. But he wasn’t merely content to take the place he could have had easily. He figured that you can’t have enough of a good thing, so he would see if he could also intrude on Ann’s territory a bit. She has not told us this yet, but she will (*Ann nods and bursts out laughing in confirmation.*) I sometimes tell my interns that someday I hope to get good enough at this so that I won’t even need the subject. (*Audience laughter.*)

If *any* father would like a boy like this, then her father would like a boy like this. So, Sam must have been his favorite, at least his favorite in the older group. Perhaps when Marty arrived her father transferred his preference to the younger boy; but at least in the older group, we would guess that Sam was father’s favorite.

Now, you have Debbie who was “very,” and she must have been everybody’s favorite—teacher’s, parents’. I suspect when teachers got Ann after Debbie, the first day they said, “Gee, I hope you’re like your sister.”

DR. M.: Did they?

ANN: Occasionally.

Teachers, incidentally, think that this is an encouraging remark (*audience laughter*) and they probably said to Sam, “I hope you’re not like your sister, Ann.” You can imagine what Ann must have felt like, growing up. Unless she had grandparents or an uncle or aunt or a favorite teacher, it must have been, “Why does everyone love everyone else but me?” (*Ann nods.*)

DR. M.: Tell me a little bit about Marty.

ANN: He’s very likeable.

DR. M.: Does anybody know what the next word is going to be?

ANN: It’s not going to be “very.” (*Audience laughter.*)

DR. M.: Don’t let us intimidate you, please, Ann. If you want to use it, okay.

ANN: He’s amusing.

DR. M.: To whom?

ANN: To me, I like him. I think he’s just a typical little kid with a big imagination.

DR. M.: He’s something like you?

ANN: Yes, he is in a way.

DR. M.: And what about Mary?

ANN: Mary is a replica of my mother, sort of.

Now, without asking a question about her mother, you're going to find out what her mother was like.

DR. M.: What was Mary like?

ANN: She's very domestic, but she's intelligent. (*Audience laughter.*)

DR. M.: And your mother is not?

ANN: Well, I don't want to go . . . well, they're both domestic, yet they're both intelligent at the same time.

DR. M.: Are you trying to say or indicate that these two don't ordinarily go together?

ANN: Not ordinarily. I was just . . . you know, you asked me what Mary was like and she's . . .

DR. M.: Are you a candidate for Women's Lib?

ANN: Yes!

DR. M.: I thought so.

ANN: Well, I was just trying to straighten you out that Mary . . . she tries to act like a mother. Like any ten-year-old girl, she tries to assume the tasks that my mother assumes. It's obvious to me.

DR. M.: Is there much competition between her and Marty?

ANN: No, not really.

DR. M.: Yet you said they fight.

ANN: Yes, they do fight, but . . .

DR. M.: Go on, tell us how it is.

ANN: Well, I don't know. It seems like Mary has her own . . . well my parents expect one thing of Mary and one thing of Marty. I think the twins realize this and they don't cross in each other's territory, so to speak.

DR. M.: Except, apparently when they do, and then they fight.

ANN: Then they fight.

If you look at the blackboard, you will see something interesting. You might not catch it if you did not write it down. Every person but one is "very" in something. Some more than others. If you look at the positive traits that Ann has described—studious, responsible, reliable, etc.—everybody has at least one "very," except Ann. She's the only "un-very" child in this family, except that she is not, because her parents probably regard her as "very" much of a problem.

ANN: *Very* true. (*Ann and audience laughter.*)

That is apparently the only way in which Ann makes sure that the family or school community take notice of her. She can't be "very" studious "all" the time; she can't please "all" the time; she's had "very" little training in responsibility. She figures that at least through—and I will use the word broadly because I have no more knowledge than you—some kind of "misbehavior," they take notice of her. They know she's there. I would also suspect that through her

own "very," she keeps her parents and teachers busier than the other four kids together. Now, her hairdo is hiding her recognition reflex. (*Audience laughter.*)

DR. M.: I know you have given us these descriptions as best you could, but let's round out the picture a bit. Who was the most intelligent, and who the least intelligent?⁴

ANN: Sam, I think, was most intelligent, and Mary, the least.

DR. M.: I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Ordinarily I would ask you to rate all five of you. But because of the limited blackboard space, and since the twins are not in your group, I am going to restrict the rating to the older three who make up one group. Now then, the most intelligent is Sam, and the least intelligent is?

ANN: Well, me.

DR. M.: You say that almost proudly.

ANN: Well, no.

DR. M.: Who got the best grades in grade school, and who the poorest?

ANN: Debbie got the best grades. Yours truly got the poorest.

DR. M.: What were your favorite subjects in grade school?

ANN: Art, gym, and English.

DR. M.: And you didn't like?

ANN: Math, science, and social studies.

Yesterday, at the Brief Psychotherapy Conference, I discussed with some of you the meaning of achievement or underachievement in school subjects. Unfortunately I don't have time to go through all subjects today, but let me take math as an example. Math is a problem-solving activity. To do math or arithmetic isn't, like spelling, a matter of just putting it in your head and when the teacher says, "Okay, spell 'dog,'" grinding it out for the teacher. You must be able to use past experience to solve the current problem. You have to use your brain as a filter. You have to know what solutions seem to be on the right track (even if eventually they are not) and to discard immediately those which you know aren't going to work at all.

Adler had noted, "Arithmetic demands the greatest degree of independence. In arithmetic, apart from the multiplication table, there is no security: everything depends on free and independent combinations" (2, p. 10). The child who does poorly in math, assuming he's had reasonably good instruction is not self-reliant. Faced with a problem, he says, "I'll never figure that out. Gee, I hope some-

⁴All the "most" and "least" questions, as well as other pairwise questions, were asked separately, but we combined them here for more compact presentation. —Ed. note.