

FAMILY THERAPY AND FAMILY LIFE STYLE¹

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Those of us who have been participating in the evolution of Adlerian psychotherapy are in the fortunate position of not having found it necessary to renounce or basically modify any of our original principles or methodological approaches. This applies to the field of family therapy inasmuch as the family constellation as well as the individual's interaction and relationships with significant family members have always been recognized as the necessary basis for the understanding of his biosocial, psychological, and cultural background. Moreover, almost 50 years ago Alfred Adler had begun to involve parents, teachers, and siblings in the treatment of problem children, and this method has been utilized by his followers ever since (4).

This differs markedly from the history of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy which has traditionally been concerned with the treatment of the individual in and by himself. In fact, when several members of one family were in treatment, the parents and children, or marriage partners, were usually seen not only separately but also by different therapists who, as a matter of principle, refused to communicate with each other.

This approach has, of course, gradually been modified. It was costly and time consuming. But it also proved to be ineffective, since the relationship of the maladapted individual to his family was usually the core of his problem. Eventually conjoint sessions were held wherein two therapists and their respective patients met together, and in some instances married couples were treated by the same therapist. One of the first psychoanalysts to do so was Mittelmann (9). Ackerman's use of family therapy further revolutionized the original Freudian approach (2). In his method all members of a given family were seen together by one therapist, often without preliminary diagnostic individual interviews. Gradually many advances in the treatment of families and married couples evolved out of this, including group therapy and different combinations of group therapy with individual therapy (11, 12).

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The developments in the Adlerian treatment of an unrelated group or a family represent steps in a logical sequence rather than radical changes. Yet they offer new vantage points as well as new techniques for diagnosis and treatment. Some psychotherapists view the unrelated group as the ideal opportunity for an individual to relieve his original family situation and to resolve conflicts resulting from it, with the therapist and the group members acting as representations of parents and siblings (8). Others find that a combination of group and individual therapy offers a particularly good "opportunity to explore the patient's goal and style of life" (10).

INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY LIFE STYLES

It was in the course of my work with family groups that I initially became aware of a family life style, comparable to Adler's concept of the individual life style. By meeting with the family as a unit we are able to perceive the family gestalt *in vivo*, while the individual life styles of the family members are sometimes visible in *statu nascendi*. When the latter is the case, we can seek to prevent the formation or continuation of neurotic patterns (6).

The following is one of Adler's formulations of the individual life style:

The style of life is founded in the first four or five years of childhood. This period closes with the full development of the ego and the consequent fixation of its attitude to life. From this time onward the answers to the questions put by life are dictated, not by the truth of relations in themselves, but by certain automatized attitudes, which we call the *style* of the individual (1, p. 7).

The family life style, like the individual life style, is a holistic concept denoting the family's "biased apperception" of the outside world (3, p. 197), and its automatized reactions to, or means of coping with this world. It represents the family's "law of movement" (3, p. 195-196) toward reaching its fictional goal.

The term fictional goal, according to the Ansbachers' comments (3, p. 88-89), expressed Adler's conviction that the origin of the goal is not reducible to objective determinants; as a fiction the goal is a fabrication, the individual's own creation; though ever-present, the goal is hidden and its true nature constitutes the essence of what might be called the "unconscious."

Family groups may have the goal to uphold images of themselves as the most talented family, the most harmonious, financially successful, popular, nonconformist, and so forth. Their life styles will vary according to their goals. The family with a goal of acceptance

would have a life style of interaction with the community. In contrast, the family with the goal of exclusiveness closes itself off, distrustfully hostile toward the outside world.

Once a family life style has been perceived by an observer, it is possible for him to see how the individual life styles of the family members developed in reaction to it. If given an opportunity to observe two or three generations together, one will become aware of specific traits which, though not inherited, have been transmitted from one generation to the next (7).

As the individual's life style begins in early childhood, the development of a family life style is apparent in the early stages of a marriage. As also described by Dreikurs (5), marriage partners choose one another as complements of each other's individual life styles. The early stages of marriage serve as a basis for either a continuation of the partners' original life styles or a break from them. The formation of a new life style is very often stormy and a reason for many marital conflicts and disharmonies. If understood, these can be resolved in group therapy with married couples.

FAMILY AND INDIVIDUAL THERAPY

Just as one confronts the individual with his life style in individual psychotherapy, in family therapy confrontation with the family life style can be utilized as a therapeutic means. The family as a whole is confronted with its fictional goal and life style, and each individual member is shown his contribution to the whole. In this way, a session can offer to each member insight into his own and the family's life style, and an understanding of their relationship to one another. Often, such a confrontation is not as painful as a confrontation in an individual session, because the burden of creating disturbance is distributed among all members, while at the same time each member is made aware of and held responsible for his own share.

Nevertheless, it is essential to this form of treatment that the therapist be sufficiently flexible to utilize a combination of individual therapy and family group therapy. The extent to which one or the other of these techniques will be used depends upon the degree of interpersonal problems and disturbance. In some cases joint family meetings may suffice. In others it is necessary to include individual sessions in order to make possible the discussion of intimate material which might damage irreparably family relationships were it to be exposed in the group.

A clinic setting, such as the Alfred Adler Mental Hygiene Clinic, where it is possible to assign different therapists to specific family members, as well as to hold conjoint sessions, is particularly well suited to family therapy. Combined or alternated with this method are such forms of group therapy as parents' groups, married couples' groups, adolescents' and children's play groups and art therapy.

I shall cite two examples of family therapy as conducted at our clinic, both of which I found to be particularly interesting illustrations of family life styles.

A FAMILY OF PERFORMERS AND FIGHTERS

Our initial contact with this family was via the mother's written application, specifically requesting family therapy. She wrote: "This application is not for myself, nor for any one member of the family, but for the family as a whole." The complaint was inability to live together harmoniously. An unusual factor in this case was that the four children, three sons, aged 17, 16, and 13, and a daughter of 14, were all involved in successful musical careers, initiated and managed by the mother.

From the subsequent sessions this family's fictional goal could be clearly delineated as a desire to be famous and successful in public performance. Their life style was, however, to achieve this success in the easiest way possible, even at the expense of others. Performing and competing was their mode of living, not only on stage, but in everyday life. While there was considerable discord at home, to the outside world they presented the appearance of a harmonious family. It was a family of performers and fighters, and a performing and fighting family.

Individual life styles. From our awareness of the family life style, we could see in this case how the individual life styles developed. Briefly: The *mother* appeared to be an active, intelligent and eloquent woman who was attempting to alter the family according to her own concepts. Frustrated in her attempts as an artist, she now lived vicariously and precariously through the lives and careers of her children. She controlled and dominated the family, and was the mainspring around which all of their discord centered; yet, it was through her efforts that the children's careers were maintained. This woman suffered from a serious chronic illness which she "used" in many ways as a weapon against her children.

The *father*, a man in his sixties, was reduced to a menial position because of his age. He was a passive individual who felt guilty about being a poor provider. Therefore, avoiding the usual male responsibility, he assumed a feminine role in the household, reliably handling such tasks as cooking, shopping, cleaning, etc.

The *two oldest boys*, spoiled by early success, were unprepared to work at anything which did not come easily or carry prestige. They relied upon the mother to pave the way for them. In the face of the slightest difficulty they became frustrated and resorted to aggressive outbursts against her. Instead of cooperating, they resisted any demands made on them, even at the expense of their valued careers. The *girl* was in the strongest position since, at the time of application, her earnings were the family's chief support. Her goal was to dominate others, overtly and covertly. She gained a great deal of satisfaction from provoking her brothers in a seductive fashion, at the same time relying upon her father for protection against the older boys' resultant molestations. The *youngest boy* was passive and compliant. He wanted to be liked, and one of the characteristics of his life style was avoidance of conflict. To this end he appeased and agreed.

The life styles of the oldest boy and of the girl were similar to that of the mother. They both shared her ambition. The girl, like her mother, wanted to be the strongest, the center of attraction. The second boy had acquired some of his father's values. He strove for an organized life. The youngest boy resembled his father both in passivity and reliability.

Therapy. This case illustrates the necessity of combining family group therapy and individual treatment. By seeing the family together, using two therapists (male and female) we aimed at discovering a means of disentangling their over-involvement with one another, to free them to pursue healthy individual goals. However, it was difficult to treat this family as a unit since, when seen together, they acted like extremely competitive children. The mother insisted on reading from her diary which chronicled the children's achievements and misdeeds. The older children either pretended to sleep, or interrupted and shouted; the younger ones were passive, appearing to be quite bored with the proceedings; and the father attempted to mediate or appease. We therefore decided to remove the stage and audience from this group of "performers" and to alternate their family group sessions with subgroup and individual sessions. Three subgroups

were formed consisting of the parents, the two oldest boys, and the younger boy and girl. As a result of this flexible approach, the individuals involved began to respond to interpretations and to develop new attitudes in their interpersonal relations within and outside the family.

THE FAMILY OF AN AMBITIOUS WOMAN

The second family, consisting of three generations, was referred to us by another agency. In the initial session we saw the parents, Mr. and Mrs. W., both in their early forties, and their daughters, ages 18 and 17, one in college, the other still in high school.

According to the mother, the problem was the girls' "laziness and lack of cooperation," and the fact that when she criticized them, their father sided with the girls. They, in turn, complained that their mother treated them like small children, watching to see that they were studying, critical of whatever housework they did, and belittling the boys they dated as "not good enough for them."

In this initial session Mrs. W. demonstrated her method of dealing with the girls, yelling at them for being inconsiderate and not helpful. Mr. W., smiling and smoking a cigar, quietly disagreed with his wife, commenting that he found nothing objectionable in the girls' behavior. He confirmed that they were not top students, but claimed they never went out during the week and studied sufficiently to get average grades. The girls began to attack the mother, pointing out that she was overambitious for them because she had failed to acquire a college education for herself, though her younger sister had achieved this goal. From the way the mother responded, it appeared evident that she was still competing with her younger sister for her mother's approval, and was using the girls to try to outdo the sister. That was the signal for us to invite Mrs. W.'s parents to join us in the following session.

As expected, the grandmother, though less aggressive than Mrs. W., was a domineering woman, and the grandfather a very passive man, much like Mr. W. Despite the grandmother's protestations, the grandfather confirmed the assertion that his wife had preferred her younger daughter to Mrs. W. Mrs. W. demonstrated her efforts to win her mother's approval by constantly turning to her for confirmation of her views and actions. Mr. W. and his father-in-law commiserated over their wives' demands. The therapist gained insight into the girls' passive-resistant life styles through observing their

obvious enjoyment of the controversy between the two older generations.

In both older generations, "upward mobility" (financially, socially and intellectually) was the fictional family goal, accepted by all members. In contrast to the first family, they were ready to work hard to reach their goal. This was their family life style. The goal was set by ambitious women who drove their husbands and children. The complementary pattern of an aggressive woman choosing a passive man was repeated in two generations.

Therapy consisted of interpreting to the family their individually interlocking behavior patterns (life styles) and immunizing the girls against the mother's ambitions. The aim was to enable them to set their own goals, rather than to develop merely in opposition to the mother and thus remain in a state of negative dependency.

SUMMARY

Using the Adlerian concept of the individual life style, this paper introduces the concept of family life style and demonstrates its usefulness in understanding the etiology and nature of the problems of disturbed families and in their treatment. Two case histories serve as illustrations.

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