1-1-1983

Early Recollections as a Counseling Technique

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Recommended Citation

Jacques, Ron (1983) "Early Recollections as a Counseling Technique," Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy: Vol. 9 : No. 1 , Article 4. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol9/iss1/4

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Most undergraduate psychology students remember Alfred Adler as being a “student” of Freud and originating the term “inferiority complex.” More advanced students may remember such concepts as “lifestyle” and “social interest.” School counselors may be acquainted with DUSO (Dinkmeyer, 1973), STEP (Dinkmeyer, 1976), teacher consultation techniques (Jacques, 1983; Jacques & Fuston, 1982), and the four goals of misbehavior (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). Many family counselors may have learned about the family constellation (Nikelly, 1972).

More recently, Adler’s contribution to the field of psychology has received greater credit (Eckstein, 1980). Several texts provide an excellent introduction to the theory and application of Adlerian Psychology (Dinkmeyer, Pew, Dinkmeyer, 1979; Nikelly, 1972; Sweeney, 1981). Members of the LDS Church would be especially interested in Allred’s book (1968) as it applies to child rearing within the Church.

**Early Recollections**

One of the primary responsibilities of an Adlerian counselor is to uncover the client’s style of life. One assessment tool used in this process is the collecting and interpreting of early recollections (ER’s). The purpose of the Life Style Assessment is to become aware of the unique beliefs, motives, and patterns of an individual (Mosak, 1958). A basic belief of Adlerian Psychology is that people only remember those events from early childhood that are consistent with their present views of themselves and the world (Dinkmeyer, Pew, Dinkmeyer, 1979). In other words, memories are not random, insignificant occurrences, but are an expression of the “story of my life.”

Kopp and Dinkmeyer (1975) presented a standardized procedure that can be used.

- Think back as far as you can to the first thing you can remember...something that happened when you were very young (it should be before you were seven or eight years old). It can be anything at all—good or bad, important or unimportant—but it should be something you can describe as a one-time incident (something that happened only once), and it should be something you can remember very clearly or picture in your mind, like a scene.

Now tell me about an incident or something that happened to you. Make sure it is something you can picture, something specific, and something where you can remember a single time it happened.

Phrases such as “we were always...,” “would always...,” “used to...” or “would happen” suggest incidents that occurred repeatedly. Ask the student to choose one specific time which stands out more clearly than the others and tell what happened at that time. If one particular incident does not stand out over others, eliminate this event and choose a different early memory which can be described as a single incident.

Before moving on to the next memory, ask the following questions and write down the student’s responses:

- Do you remember how you felt at the time or what reaction you had to what was going on? (If so), please describe it. Why did you feel that way (or have that reaction)?

Which part of the memory stands out most clearly from the rest--like if you had a snapshot of the memory, it would be the very instant that is most vivid and clear in your mind? How did you feel (what was your reaction) at that instant?

Our experience indicates that, although we can begin to see a student’s basic beliefs and motivations in the first memory, the accuracy of these interpretations increases when they are based on additional memories. The counselor’s assessment thus should be based on at least three memories. Typically, from three to six memories are collected (p. 24).

Sweeney (1975) provides some additional guidelines about how to utilize the early recollections.

- Is the individual active or passive?
- Is he/she an observer or participant?
- Is he/she giving or receiving?
- Does he/she go forth or withdraw?
- What are his/her physical posture or position in relation to what is around him?
- Is he/she alone or with others?
- Is he/she concerned with people, things, or ideas?
- What relationship does he/she place him/herself into with others? Inferior? Superior?
- What emotion does he/she use?
- What feeling tone is attached to the event or outcome?
- Are detail and color mentioned?
- Do stereotypes of authorities, subordinates, men, women, old, young, etc. reveal themselves?
- Prepare a “headline” which captures the essence of an event; for example, in relation to the woman’s recollection of the ice cream: Girl Gets Job Done.
- Look for themes and overall pattern.
- Look for corroborations in the family constellation information (p. 49).

**Interpretation of ER’S: An Example**

Janice, a woman in her mid-twenties, sought counseling to deal with her depression, suicidal tendencies, and to “find my testimony.” She was experiencing marital difficulties and had recently lost her newborn child due to a birth defect. She had been progressing quite well in therapy and was expressing a greater interest in attending church. She knew her husband was not interested, but she was. After several weeks with no progress toward attending any church meetings, she was asked to relate some ER’s of her early church experiences.

Recollection A: In Primary, we had a dinner of some sort, I don’t remember what the occasion was. All the parents were invited, and as usual, I had no parents there. They had a bunch

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of Kentucky Fried Chicken. My Primary class served the dinner. I dropped a plate of chicken in the hall. I scooped it up, and was going to take it out and serve it. A lady came up behind me and realized what I was doing. She made me throw the food away. The floor looked clean to me. There was enough food to feed our whole family for one whole day. I couldn't understand what was the big deal. I felt foolish and stupid that I didn't understand. I felt like everyone would talk about me and our dirty family.

Interpretation: The interpretation of ER's is a very subjective process. It is a process of discovering patterns of meaning that are unique to each individual.

The interpretation is not done statically—in terms of a person's present position—but is, instead continuously related to one's movement. It refers to the direction and cause of the person's transactions with others. It also alludes to where the person is going and to what the person expects to get by his or her behavior—to be special, to be in control, or to obtain special service. Thus, the interpretation enables the person to see the pattern of movement and its meaning (Dinkmeyer, Pew, Dinkmeyer, 1979, p. 95).

Thus, the interpretation of the ER is interconnected with the interpretation of the whole life style.

This ER would suggest a person who feels extremely inferior. She sees herself as clumsy, dirty, and stupid. She sees others as more competent, capable and worthwhile. The world is unpredictable and full of unhappy experiences. She really isn't good enough to go to church.

Recollection B: I went to church with an adult (Jance was uncomfortable with the word "friend"). I was in the sixth grade. During the closing prayer, I suddenly got a terrible bloody nose. I was afraid to get up because I would bleed all over everybody.
So, I leaned over, cupped my hands over my nose, and caught the blood. My hands filled up, and it started dripping. I kept thinking the prayer would never come to an end. It finally did. The person (once again avoiding the word "friend") took me to the kitchen and got the bleeding stopped. I felt embarrassed and helpless. I should be able to take care of myself. I felt angry at myself for not knowing what to do.

Interpretation: The actual event, whether it happened as recorded or not, is not as important as the subjective meaning of the event. Here we see a person, perceived as being incapable, needing someone else to take care of her. She must not get too close to others because the dirt (blood) might rub off on them. From her point of view, she doesn't belong in the church because of her inferiority. She needs others to take care of her but they risk being tainted by her.

Summary of ER's: These ER's were collected for the specific purpose of understanding Janice's reluctance to attend church. They also demonstrate her overall outlook on life. While she was making progress in other parts of her life, Janice still resisted church attendance. It was clearly understood and, most importantly, by Janice that she resisted going to church because she would be an outsider, one who was not good enough to worship there.

Conclusion
Early recollections represent an important contribution for counselors. They can be obtained quite easily and they provide a wealth of therapeutic information. By using ER's, the counselor is quickly able to develop rapport with the client. They help to focus on probable reasons for certain behaviors. ER's also help the counselor to formulate counseling objectives (Kopp & Dinkmeyer, 1975).

The purpose of this paper has been to acquaint the reader with the use of early recollections in counseling. Hopefully, it has sparked an interest in one additional technique that can be used successfully in a counseling relationship.

REFERENCES
Allred, G. H. Mission For Mothers. Salt Lake City, Utah. Bookcraft. 1968