

Early Memories as a Guide to Client Movement Through Life

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Abstract

Early memories are a projective tool which Adlerian psychologists have been using since the 1930's. Their elicitation and interpretation allows a counsellor to make accurate guesses about an individual's typical way of coping with life. This paper outlines the theory of the significance of early memories and a procedure for their elicitation and interpretation. It provides several examples of their use in an encouraging therapeutic context.

Résumé

Les souvenirs d'enfances servent d'outils projectifs que les psychologues Adlériens utilisent depuis les années 1930. L'interprétation et l'obtention de ces mémoires permettent au thérapeute de deviner le style typique par lequel un individu affronte les défis de sa vie. Cet ouvrage décrit la théorie de la signification des souvenirs d'enfances et un procédé pour obtenir et interpréter ces souvenirs. Plusieurs exemples sont fournis afin de démontrer leur utilisation dans un contexte thérapeutique positif.

One of the important skills of Adlerian counselling and therapy is the use of client early memories to formulate the direction and goal of client movement in the social field. Adler used early memories as a projective method as early as the 1920's (Adler, 1964, pp. 351-357; Mosak, 1958, p. 303). The purpose of this paper is to outline the theory and practice of the use of early memories and to provide the reader with several examples. I hope to show the effectiveness of this technique to succinctly assess client issues and to formulate alternatives for counsellor and client.

THEORY

Adler's psychology is a well-articulated, phenomenological, holistic, and socially-oriented psychology (Mosak, 1984, p. 56). Meanings an individual gives to oneself, to others, and to the world within the social field govern behaviour in the field. An individual is said to have a *direction of movement* in the field, or typical way of coping with life, which is an expression of that individual's attitudes and goals in life (Adler, 1964, pp. 195-196). This movement is always based on the individual's perceived options or expectations of attaining an ideal place in life. This set of meanings also governs the retention, selection, and expression of early memories. Current movement is taken to be *justified* by early memories rather than *caused* by the events recalled.

Adler believed that memories are reminders carried about of one's possibilities and limits, and of the meaning of circumstances. There are no "chance memories." On the contrary, out of the innumerable impres-

sions which an individual forms, one remembers only those felt to have a bearing on the difficulty at hand. Thus memories represent a story one repeats to oneself to excuse, to warn, to encourage, to comfort, and generally to keep one concentrated on one's goal in preparing to meet the future according to an already tried and tested style of action (Adler, 1931, p. 73). They serve, in short, as maxims and apothegms.

Early memories have a special significance since they show an individual's direction of movement in its simplest expression. These memories can reflect the challenges a child may have had to confront in early life as well as the responses to them. Their influence can be seen in a client's current main interests, relationships to other members of the family, and, by generalization, to others in their life (Adler, 1931, p. 74). The reader is referred to Dreikurs (1989), Mosak (1958; 1969), and Olson (1979) for further exposition and reports of reliability and validity studies.

Thus there are numerous benefits to generating early memories in the context of counselling. Clients can come to understand their preferred patterns of dealing both with others and with situations they perceive to be difficult. Because the counsellor can empathically enter the client's world using the client's own language, the client can more readily understand how and why they do things. These early memories provide a simple reference model of client's behaviour which allows counsellor and client to generate alternatives.

PROCEDURE

Initially one differentiates clearly with the client the distinction between a *report* and an early memory. A report is a statement of something that frequently, often, or usually happened. "We used to go to the beach in the summer" is a report. An early memory is a statement of something that happened once, a specific incident, such as "I recall once when my brothers and I were at the beach . . ." (Mosak, 1958, p. 305).

The client may be asked, "Please give me your earliest memory" or "What is the earliest event of your life which you recall now?" I tend to use the latter formulation when the client presents a quite specific difficulty or symptom, and the former when trying to elicit general behavioural patterns.

The response must be written down *verbatim*. It is important to record the response as accurately as possible since the interpretation of the early memory depends on the client's choice of words, the detail provided, and sometimes on the nuances of the delivery.

The client is then asked, "What is the most vivid part of that memory for you?" If that is not entirely clear, the request can be altered to, "If this memory were a movie, what scenes would stand out the most for you just now?" After providing this information, the client is asked, "What feeling did you have at the most vivid point?" Frequently, this may already

have been stated. Perhaps the client might have to speculate about feelings, or respond to a question such as "What would it be right now if you were in the same situation?" Inquiring as to why the client felt that way will provide further insight into motivation. The feeling provides information about the client's preferred direction of movement or way of coping. The counsellor must never guess at the most vivid point or the feeling at that point. If no feeling is offered even on inquiry, that in itself is important information about the client.

Counsellor understanding of the early memory is conceptualized around four themes although this is not usually presented to the client in a cut-and-dried form. One chooses a presentation which helps achieve a therapeutic goal. The four themes are the following:

1. the *self-concept*, or the speaker's convictions about oneself;
2. the *self-ideal*, or the convictions the speaker has about how one should be or must be in order to have a place in the social environment;
3. the *context* or *world*, or convictions about other people, men, women, objects, or life itself which the speaker holds; and
4. the *ethical convictions*, or the code of right and wrong which the speaker has drawn from the event. (Mosak, 1984, p. 69)

Not all of these will be apparent in any given early memory. Up to ten early memories may be elicited, interpreted individually, and then formulated into a cohesive summary of early recollections. With the assumption of holism, Adlerian counsellors assume that all early memories are consistent and provide a coherent story if interpreted correctly.

This summary must be presented to the client in some fashion for clarification and acceptance. This clarification process itself is a therapeutic move in which one will frequently surprise the client with the accuracy of one's speculations. When accurate (agreed-upon) summaries are available, they can be very helpful in helping clients to understand their present difficulties in life.

EXAMPLES

I present two examples from my own practice. Material in brackets was collected at the time, but is report. The most vivid scene is in italics. These are not particularly unusual examples, except the second is perhaps lengthier than many.

1. A 41 year-old woman, oldest of four, presents with mild depression and over-eating when feeling low. She feels stuck in a job which is, for her, dull and below her capacities. She is not progressing as she would like in her plan of self-employment. She also is in a relationship which is not satisfying. She presents this single early memory of an event which occurred at age six.

[I remember an accident that occurred when I was in grade one.] We were playing Follow the Leader. It was wet out—we were trooping through the puddles and I fell into a hole. I remember *trying to climb out and as I was reaching out, the ground was caving in around me*. I was afraid of drowning or suffocating. And I told my girl friend to run home and get my dad. He had to lay on his stomach to get me to come out ‘cause the ground was collapsing. I was pulled out and I remember being afraid that I was going to get heck from Mom because I got my white stockings dirty.

Feeling at most vivid point: fear that I might die.

There is a great deal of material here which may bear on the client’s present life. Because she had some psychological understanding of herself I presented the first four statements below to her in point form, which she confirmed instantly as accurate. The last came out in further discussion.

- a. There are pitfalls in life.
- b. Even when the ground is caving in around me, and I am afraid, I can still act.
- c. I need a man to pull me out of difficulties.
- d. I need to look good for women.
- e. I am confident in a group when I feel included and not confident when I don’t.

Only a, b, and c were directly pertinent to her present difficulties. She feels that she has fallen into a hole and needs help to extricate herself. She moves to get this help (from a male counsellor). Therapy continued with her movement into her career without the help of men (except me), her abandonment of her unsatisfactory relationship, and with a more realistic assessment of the seriousness of the difficulties in life. She realizes life has difficulties which may be faced with or without the help of men; she knows she has strength and assets of her own to call upon which are equal to the difficulties life gives her.

2. A man, 47, a middle “blacksheep” bracketed by two “good” sisters, presents with difficulties. He habitually lies, especially to women, he has affairs, and his relationships with women “come apart.” He has just left his third marriage. He was a cocaine abuser for four years. He presents the following early memory of an event which took place when he was 4 to 5 years old.

I remember I was left alone in the house. [I don’t know why. We had hardwood floors with scatter carpets. I was fascinated with fire and we had a potbelly stove. I used to stick matches or paper in it to play.] I got ahold of some matches and I went into my mother’s bedroom and I crumpled up some newspaper and I lit it and watched the whole thing burn in the middle of the bedroom, on the floor. I

got scared and excited. As it died down I realized I couldn't do anything about it. It was burnt into the floor. I moved the dresser to hide the paper in the middle of the room. I went and hid in my bedroom. My parents came home, I remember them yelling and screaming. My dad grabbed me by the arm and sat me in front of the ashes. He yelled, almost insanelly, *with his eyes popping out*, "What have you done here!" I saw lots of anger and hate. I got quite a bad beating.

Feeling at most vivid point: terrified.

I did not present him with a series of statements; I judged it was important for him to find a different direction of movement. I presented the single statement, also found in other of his early memories, pertinent to his present difficulties, that "I do things which I know will create excitement and which will get me into trouble and then I hide until I am found. I make others look for me, find me, punish me. I provoke trouble and wait to be found out." I incorporated other pertinent beliefs, in particular, "I set fire in women's bedrooms," and "Men terrify me," as they became relevant. Therapy continued until he understood the alternative:

I do not need to make trouble for myself. It does not help me to feel blamed, unless I intend to lie and hide. My alternatives are not either to be punished or to please others; I can come forward into life with long-term goals, choose, and work to improve relationships with women which are productive.

The difference between these two cases is instructive. Because the woman was psychologically adept, she was amenable to insight regarding specific self-defeating attitudes. She was able to use an awareness of her dependence on men in a rather direct fashion to alter some of her choices. However, it seemed important to present to the man an overall description of his self-reinforcing pattern of seeking importance through being a "blacksheep" in a general (and non-threatening) way, and to look for examples.

DISCUSSION

There are two further points worth making. First, in interpreting early memories, we are eliciting individuals' attitudes and how they will attempt to create interactional patterns, not a mere description of overt behaviours. We seek to portray an outlook rather than mere behaviour (Mosak, 1958, p. 307). Additionally, it may appear that the presentation of these summaries is confrontative. This is frequently so. However, they are not presented as if from an "authority." They are presented with judgment concerning the goals of the client, the strength of the therapeutic relationship, and in a way which enhances their correction or acceptance. They are presented as part of a cooperative, investigative therapy in which one might say, "Could it be that you act in such a way to...?" In the context of an encouraging therapy, one is looking for

assets and those things that may be blocking the use of assets in facing life. These beliefs frequently do block the use of one's assets. Nonetheless, much more is usually required to redirect client behaviour than the mere elicitation and confirmation of these beliefs about life.

OTHER USES

In addition to their use in individual therapy, early memories can be used in other ways. They can be used in group therapy to help reveal the preferred interactions of group members (Shulman, 1962), or as a starting point for psychodrama, especially in family and group therapy (Shulman, 1960). An early memory can be used as can a dream or fantasy to explore for meaning, and to modify or redirect movement (Gold, 1979). The early memory can be used to understand the probable relationship between client and therapist (Mosak, 1965). One can ask the client to draw an early memory (S. E. Dreikurs, 1986). One can judge the success of therapy by analyzing the difference in early memories presented at the beginning and at the end of therapy (Mosak, 1958; Dreikurs, 1989). In general, their use is re-educative; they are a tool which displays in miniature the client's expectations, and which can be used to generate alternatives.

There is a definite need for training in the use of early memories as a therapeutic tool. In a workbook by Mosak, Schneider, and Mosak (1980) the authors caution that the art of interpreting early memories is a complex one and, if used beyond one's competence, is unprofessional, unethical, possibly harmful, and simply confusing. Training is available, however, on a regular basis in both Canada and the United States.

Many counsellors besides those of an Adlerian orientation can use this skill effectively. It will probably appeal to counsellors who believe that people act consistently, and that they exemplify their consistency in their mental productions as well as in their overt behaviour.

SUMMARY

This paper summarizes the Adlerian theory of the use and usefulness of early memories in assessment and in counselling. A procedure is outlined by which early recollections can be collected and interpreted and several examples of interpretation within individual therapy are provided. Other uses to which they may be put are also suggested.

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