Envy in Siblings-in-Law Relationships

Aviva Dolev and Rachel Shifron

Abstract

We focus on the issue of envy in siblings-in-law relationships, beginning with a literature review that encompasses two topics: Envy, which is a symptom of a more fundamental process of acute lack of socialization, and the use of early recollections (ERs), which is an Adlerian therapeutic effective method. We explore a case study that includes a full family constellation and client ERs, because the client’s lifestyle and strategies, which are the sources of her pain, show her ways to connect. We further detail intervention processes using the ERs and dreams.

Keywords: Individual Psychology, envy, jealousy, belonging, social interest, early recollections, dreams, meaning, contribution, creativity

Introduction

Here we present a case of a woman who suffers from low self-esteem, which manifested in the form of envy described in this work. We introduce intervention processes using early recollections and dreams.

Envy is an emotion that “occurs when a person lacks another’s superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it” (Parrott & Smith, 1993, p. 906).

Envy occurs in personal relationships such as friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships (Shifron & Bettner, 2014). However, siblings-in-law relationships have a high potential for experiencing envy, because they are associated with nonintimate relationships (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998). Envy between a dyad of siblings or siblings-in-law is destructive to the whole family. It influences, and is influenced by, relationships and interactions with other family members (Bateson, 1979).

Envy and the Lack of Social Interest

The biblical story of Joseph and his brothers illustrates how rivalry can provoke envy. Joseph was the youngest son of Jacob. To show that Joseph was his favorite, Jacob gave him a fancy coat. Joseph’s brothers hated him and sold him to the Ishmaelite, who took him to Egypt. The story portrays
Joseph as a man who strived for powerful positions and thus became his brothers' object of envy. Another biblical story that shows envy as a strong, destructive emotion provoked by competition among siblings is that of Cain and Abel (Shifron & Bettner, 2014). Cain was the first human to commit murder. He killed his brother Abel because God favored Abel's sacrifice and rejected Cain's—consistent with Adler's argument that envy appears when self-assertion becomes extraordinarily intense (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

In the biblical story of Solomon's judgment, two young women live in the same house and give birth to infant sons. When one infant dies, both women claim to be the mother of the living child. King Solomon declared his solution to the bitter argument would be to split the live son in two; each woman would receive half the child. The mother of the dead son agreed immediately. She exclaimed, "It shall be neither mine nor yours—divide it!" The real mother chose to give the baby to the other woman so that the child would remain alive. This story well illustrates the concept of envy. Envy is defined as malicious, angry, destructive feelings people have when believing someone else possesses a prized quality they lack (Klein, 1975). Envious people wish to attack the other person so the other will no longer have the envied quality (Boris, 1991; Klein, 1975). In Solomon’s story, the dead son’s mother preferred the death of the live baby (by splitting him in two) to insure the real mother could not have what she herself had lost.

Most theories saw emotions as responses to life events. First, an individual feels emotions according to these events. Then, the emotions direct the individual’s behavior. For example, Klein defined jealousy as feelings of anger, betrayal, and hurt that arise when we lose, or fear to lose, a relationship central to us (Church, 2000). The biological approach saw emotions as outcomes of chemical imbalance that need pharmacological treatment (Rasmussen, 2003). From the Adlerian perspective, emotions result from the "meaning one gives to life and of the goal set for one's strivings" (Adler cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Dreikurs (1971) described them as an individual’s overall orchestration directed toward achieving lifestyle goals.

Adler distinguished between socially disjunctive and socially conjunctive emotions, saying:

The disjunctive emotions (trennende Aftekte) such as anger, sorrow, or fear are not mysterious phenomena which cannot be interpreted. They appear always where they serve a purpose corresponding to the life method or guiding line of the individual. Their purpose is to bring about a change of the situation in favor of the individual. They are intensified movements at which an individual arrives only when he has renounced another possibility of asserting himself, or, in other words, when he no longer believes that there is any other possibility. (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, pp. 227).
Furthermore, negative emotions such as aggression, anxiety, fear, and alienation are viewed as outward symptoms of a more fundamental process of discouragement with respect to being valued and feeling belonging (Adler, 1929, 1931, 1933).

However, according to Adlerian theory, the individual is goal-oriented and strives toward belonging and significance. In mental disorder, the individual sets an unrealistic goal of exaggerated significance or superiority over others. This may occur in early childhood when feelings of inferiority, for which one aims to compensate, lead to creating a fictional, unrealistic goal to future security and success (Stein, 2006).

In the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (1912), Davidson said:

> Envy is an emotion that is essentially both selfish and malevolent. It is aimed at persons, and implies dislike of one who possesses what the envious man himself covets or desires, and a wish to harm him. Grasping-ness for self and ill will lie at the basis of it. There is in it also a consciousness of inferiority to the person envied, and a chafing under this consciousness. He who has got what I envy is felt by me to have the advantage of me, and I resent it. Consequently, I rejoice if he finds that his envied possession does not give him entire satisfaction—much more, if it actually entails on him dissatisfaction and pain: that simply reduces his superiority in my eyes, and ministers to my feelings of self-importance. As signifying in the envious man a want that is ungratified, and as pointing to a sense of impotence inasmuch as he lacks the sense of power which possession of the desired object would give him, envy is in itself a painful emotion, although it is associated with pleasure when misfortune is seen to befall the object of it. (p. 20)

*Jealousy* and *envy* are regarded as two close but distinct emotions. Jealousy is considered as originating from a positive attachment to another and a fundamental fear of losing someone important (Church, 2000). Envy stems from resentment, begrudging, and the wish to attack so the other will no longer have the envied quality (Boris, 1991; Guerrero & Andersen, 1998; Klein 1975).

According to Parrot and Smith (1993), envy occurs when another has what one lacks, whereas jealousy is usually concerned with the loss of a relationship one already possesses. They claimed envy involves two elements (oneself and a person to whom one compares poorly), but jealousy requires three (oneself, a partner in a relationship, and a rival to whom one fears this relationship will be lost).

We use Shifron and Bettner’s (2014) definitions as the basis of our work: “Jealousy is when I want or wish to have what you have. Envy is when I am ready to feel or behave destructively towards you when I do not have what you have” (p. 112).
Envy and jealousy may co-occur. Jealousy is often accompanied by envy, but envy may occur without jealousy (Schmitt, 1988). Later, we refer to this relationship between the two emotions by presenting a case study showing that sometimes jealousy is antecedent to envy.

Research on social-comparison processes showed that all human beings make comparisons. These comparisons are common among individuals, races, and nations (Beecher & Beecher, 1971). Social-comparison jealousy is described as "the pain of comparison" resulting from an unfavorable comparison with others on self-relevant dimensions (Tesser & Campbell, 1983).

All humans feel the need to belong. According to Adlerian theory, that need may diminish when a child feels rejected or is pampered. Ferguson (2010) said feeling belonging is crucial for the individual's mental health and, at the societal level, it is crucial that all members of the community feel they belong.

The goal of being a contributor strengthens when a person feels he or she belongs. A person who does not feel belonging develops a strategy to strive to be special, thinking that being special will result in feelings of belonging, rather than striving to contribute to the welfare of others (Ferguson, 2010). Based on this view, people who do not feel they belong may try to get something they do not have but others do. In other words, when there are no feelings of belonging, jealousy and then envy may appear.

Envy is considered a central feature of narcissistic personalities (Krizan & Johar, 2012). Empirical research identified two distinct expressions of narcissistic tendencies, one centered on grandiosity and the other on vulnerability (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Arrogance and inflated self-views characterize grandiose narcissism (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), supported by assertive downward social comparisons (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedujudes, 2002). Low self-esteem, chronic feelings of inadequacy (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008; Pincus et al., 2009), and a tendency to upward comparisons characterize vulnerable narcissism (Smith, Parrott, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994). The empirical findings of Krizan and Johar (2012) showed lack of positive association between grandiose narcissism and envy, and a strong association between narcissistic vulnerability and chronic envy. These findings reinforced their assumption that grandiose individuals are less likely to experience envy because they perceive themselves as better than others do. Thus, they lack the attributes that are the most common source of envy. On the other hand, vulnerable narcissistic individuals' low self-esteem and tendency to compare themselves upwardly lead them to perceive others as better and to feeling inferior—critical attributes to produce envy.

However, in this paper, we concentrate on the Adlerian approach, which sees narcissism as serving the purpose of overcoming the "dark feeling" of inferiority through exaggerated safeguarding of self-esteem. This
exaggeration may lead to aggression and readiness to injure other persons through sadism, hatred, wanting to have the last word, intolerance, and envy to compensate for the feeling of being inferior (Adler in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 268).

Social Interest

Envy between siblings is not a certainty. It can be avoided or decreased with correct socialization training. Adler (in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) said that if a child has good upbringing in the first three or four years—that is, if he or she has been trained to play with others and join in the common spirit—then the child will be spared not only low self-esteem and self-centeredness, but also possible neurosis and even mental illness.

Adler saw social interest as key to well-being and argued that all failures are due to the lack of social interest (Shifron, 2010). The concept of social interest is a commitment to contribute to the welfare of others in one's family, groups of friends, and community as well as to other human beings in general. Adler said, “Social interest is the barometer of the child’s normality” (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 154). Although innate, “it can be developed only when the child is already in the midst of life” (p. 134). “This can occur through the relationship with the parents and then by encouraging the child to extend his interest to his friends and others” (p. 135). This idea points out two important issues: (1) A parenting role is to develop the child’s social interest for the sake of his or her normality and well-being, and (2) Lack of social interest may result in feeling insecurity and thus, envy. Adler wrote:

Sympathy is the purest expression of social interest. Where we find it, we may generally rest assured that there is social interest. This emotion reveals the extent to which an individual is able to empathize with the situation of a fellow man. (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 228)

Early Recollections (ERs) and Dreams

Mosak defined an ER as a specific, one-time incident one remembers from childhood and can picture in the mind's eye (Mosak, 1958). Adlerians presume ERs to be not literally true, but rather selective, subjective reconstructions of past events (Adler in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) that describe the person's thoughts and feelings in the present. Working with ERs is a diagnostic tool to find the patient's lifestyle and striving direction (Adler, 1937). The ER technique has been used in therapy since the time of Alfred Adler (1927/1998a, 1931/1998b, 1937).
In Adlerian therapy, ERs are essential to interpreting the client's current subjective perception. The ERs help identify the client's lifestyle and "private logic" (Kopp, 1998). The Adlerian approach considers dreams as one expression of lifestyle (Adler in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956):

The so-called conscious and unconscious are not contradictory, but form a single unity, and the method used in interpreting the "conscious" life may be used in interpreting "unconscious" or "semi-conscious" life, the life of our dreams... The dreams strive to pave the way towards solving a problem by a metaphorical expression of it, by a comparison "as if," and in itself is a sign that the dreamer feels inadequate to solve the problem by common sense alone. (Adler cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, pp. 359–360)

Kopp (1995, 1998) developed an intervention technique based on the work of Marlis Auterson (which includes exploring and transforming re-construction of ERs). In this technique, the counselor asks if the client would like to change anything in the ER or dream. It is important that the therapist guides the client and shows alternatives and different ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Sometimes the therapist must direct the client with certain questions, for example, "What would you change in order to feel significance and belonging?" or, "How would you change your metaphor so all participants will feel good?" Then, it is essential to bring the client to the present and ask, "How would you take and use it in your real life?" and "What would you change in yourself?"

The following is a presentation of a case study to illustrate the issue of envy and effective interventions using ERs.

**Envy in Siblings-in-Law Relationships: A Case Study**

D is a woman in her late 40s who experienced nervous breakdowns reflected by obsessive thoughts against her parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, and nephews, followed by depression, long crying spells, insomnia, feeling miserable, and having inferior feelings. She accused her family in her situation and showed envious relationships with her two sisters-in-law. D acted aggressively, had tantrums, and attacked her parents. She thought they preferred and sided with one of her sisters-in-law. She mentioned she once attacked her nephew several years ago. She had chosen to disconnect from her brothers and their families for six years and refused her brothers' attempts to recreate any connection with her. Her condition hurt her and her family, including her parents and siblings; influenced her ability to function with her husband and children; and affected her physical health. D mentioned she had tried to disconnect from her parents as well, but it made her feel miserable. During the first sessions with her, she would cry and shout.
whenever she talked about past events in which she believed her family acted against her.

This illustrates that during sessions with a client, it is important to determine family constellations and early memories in order to emphasize strengths and abilities the client is not aware of and to understand the client's lifestyle.

D's Family Constellation

D is the youngest sibling and the only daughter after two sons. Her relationship with her family was good until her brothers married. She mentioned a significant and “traumatic” event when she was 15 years old. She saw her sister-in-law sitting on her father's knees—where she used to sit before that sister-in-law entered the family. As a result, D claimed she developed hair loss, which was subsequently treated successfully.

Some of D's ERs

**ER Age 9:** My second brother started to practice karate. One day he returned home bleeding. My elder brother called me and said, “Let's go there and see what happened.” My parents were apathetic. I was a little girl. I was worried about my brother but also surprised by the situation.

Focus: Taking responsibility for my brother
Feelings: Worry

**ER Age 6:** I used to go with my father to a synagogue and I'd sit on his knees. Then the Yom Kippur War broke out and my father had to join the army. Soon after, when my father returned to pray in the synagogue, I couldn't sit on his knees anymore. They told me to go to the women's section. So I stopped going to the synagogue with my Daddy. I felt angry because I was separated from my father.

Focus: Separation from my father and having to go to the women's section
Feelings: Anger

**ER Age 5:** My uncle and his wife came to visit us from abroad. My uncle's wife was a spoiled woman. She always complained she had headaches, and my uncle always took care of her and let her rest. My parents were irritated because they thought she controlled him.

Focus: My parents mocked her
Feelings: Sympathy for my uncle and aunt

A dream: I went to a nightclub with my daughter. As I arrived at the entrance, I saw my parents dancing with my sister-in-law. There was a coffee shop in front of the club. They welcomed us warmly. We hugged and smiled at each other. My daughter and I entered the club and saw there was only
one empty chair left. I let my daughter sit on the chair, and for me, there was no chair. I and lots of other people who didn’t find a chair had to go out of the club and on a very long and unpleasant journey in dunes and dust, until I arrived back to sit near my daughter. While I was walking, I considered sending a cell phone text message to my friends complaining about my terrible fate, and that outside the club, my parents were dancing with my sister-in-law. I decided it was a lost battle.

   Focus: My parents dancing with my sister-in-law outside the club
   Feelings: Anger—Why don’t they stay with me as I fight to be with my daughter?

According to her ERs, D’s goal was to be important and central. She saw herself as a very special member of her family and a reliable sister who is asked to help her brother.

In the first ER, it is important to see the potential to develop mature social interest. D worries about her brother. Her ERs and “traumatic” event are an accurate metaphor for her pain. It tells the story of a woman who, when her sisters-in-law joined the family, felt removed from the “royal throne.” She started to see her sisters-in-law as competitors for her father’s heart and attention. All she wants is to be the only daughter, sitting again on her father’s knees. As a result, she developed envious relationships with her sisters-in-law and was willing to sacrifice her object of envy—her parents—to be the important, only daughter in her parents’ hearts. Her envy toward other family members is obvious in the ER of when her parents were irritated because they believed her uncle spoiled his wife. The envy in this ER belonged to her parents; however, it indicated her own envious feelings because the ER is a metaphor of herself. The envy is also clear in her dream of when she and her daughter meet her parents dancing with her sister-in-law in front of the club. In this dream, she expected her parents to stay with her and leave her sister-in-law. She saw the situation as “a lost battle.” The dream shows that the only possible way to stay with her parents was when they were only with her. She made an extreme choice: if I cannot be the only important woman, I will not be at all.

Adler wrote, “An only boy brought [up] in a family of girls, and an only girl brought [up] in a family of boys [emphasis added] may feel they must assert their difference and superiority” (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 382). Moreover, Adler claimed:

All other children can be dethroned, but never the youngest. He has no followers but many peacemakers. He is always the baby of the family, probably the most pampered, and faces the difficulties of a pampered child. But, because he is so much stimulated and has many chances for competition, he often develops in an extraordinary way, runs faster than the other children and overcomes them all [emphasis added]. (p. 380)
The development of the child is determined by the interpretation he or she chose to make into reality (Adler, in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). D was pampered in her childhood, and a child who has come to expect pampering will feel alienated, as though they do not belong, whenever not pampered (Ferguson, 2010).

D faced life with the idea that she must be very important and the center of attention in order to feel included and valued. Whenever she did not feel this way, she felt alienated and thought she did not belong. The next ER shows that concept.

ER Age 6: My aunt came from abroad with her children to visit us. I was . . . in the year-end show at school. I remember going to that school with my aunt and my cousins. I hoped everything would pass okay, that the guests would find their place in my class—a kind of emotional liability.

Focus: Sharing, coming from abroad

Feelings: Concern my relatives would have a place to sit, a kind of responsibility toward my aunt and cousins, and hoping they would feel okay because they did not know the language.

This ER illustrates that, to sense social interest, D had to be the center of attention, the favorite. She could be kind when she is the center of attention. According to Adler, in order to feel a sense of belonging, one needs to feel equality with others (Ferguson, 2010). This means a person needs to feel neither superior nor inferior. Expecting to be the “only girl sitting on [her] father’s knees” and refusing to see herself as equal to her sisters-in-law is inconsistent with equality or concern for the well-being of the other. Adler wrote about this type:

If confronted strongly by a situation which he feels to be in the nature of examination, a test of his social value, a judgment upon this social usefulness, a person of this type acts in an unsocial way. The more active of this type attack others directly. (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 168)

D’s behavior toward her family is well understood in this description. She used her energy to overinterfere and get involved in things that were none of her business, both inside and outside of her family.

Further investigation showed that underlying her envy were hidden feelings of inferiority compared with her brothers because of their financial success. Ferguson (2001) wrote, “Feelings of inferiority that concern personal status are exaggerated when a person has a lowered social interest, and personal inferiority feelings in turn sabotage the individual commitment to contribute to the welfare of the community” (p. 327). Therefore, D’s therapy focused on her ability to relate to others, to increase her social interest and lower her pain.
The Therapeutic Process

The most damaging effects of D’s envy and destructive behavior were the impairment of her basic need to belong and its resulting decrease of her self-esteem. Her envy also affected her husband and her children, who felt they did not have a family to belong to. From Adlerians’ point of view, obsessive thoughts and aggressive actions characterize the envious person and indicate creative methods to overcome inferiority feelings (Shifron & Bettner, 2003). Therefore, in therapy, it is essential to focus on diverting a person’s creative energy into more productive, constructive behaviors to overcome inferiority feelings. The work with D included the following steps:

Working with ERs and Dreams

We used ERs and dreams to:

1. Better understand D’s lifestyle; identify and point out her strength, creative power, and resourcefulness, and enable her to overcome the inferiority feelings that fueled her envy.
2. Demonstrate and help her understand herself.
3. Explore her alternative behaviors through the technique of reconstructing ERs and dreams.

Strength and Creativity in ERs

As mentioned before, the goal of aggression and envy is the person’s creative ability to safeguard self-esteem (Shifron, 1999). Therefore, the first step of the therapeutic work requires the therapist to emphasize, point out, and illuminate the client’s strength and creativity (Shifron & Bettner, 2003). Affirming D’s strength and creativity was an optimistic light at the end of the tunnel. This important step in Adlerian therapy enables the client to move away from his or her pathology and limitations. In D’s ER of sitting on her father’s knees, we can see her need for intimacy and a feeling of belonging with close people. Two ERs showed her ability to care and contribute to others: the ER in which she went with her elder brother to see why her other brother was bleeding, and the ER with her aunt and cousins when she put in extra effort to care for their comfort. She knew how to appreciate them for joining her in the year-end school show. Although we can see in the last mentioned ER that she needs to be the center of attention in order to care, it is important to help her to see these abilities. It is also essential to show her that she can use this strength to change and improve her life. This intervention is extremely encouraging.

In D’s therapy, the technique of reconstructing ERs and dreams was used most often, as in the following examples:
ER Age 7 (one of D’s last ERs): It is a picture of my father sitting on our balcony wearing an undershirt, while my big brother is playing a guitar, and I am getting up and come out blurry in this picture.
Focus: My father
Feelings: Calmness, serenity

This ER shows improvement in her feelings: no more emotional storms, nervous breakdowns, obsessive thoughts, or depression. Instead, serenity and calm reflect her reality. Although the focus is on her father, she started to see her brother in a positive light. Despite this improvement, in this ER she is still blurry in her family picture. The following is the reconstruction, as she would change it.

Reconstruction of the ER:
Counselor: What can you change in this picture?
D: I would have remained seated in the chair with my father and my brother and looked at the camera.
Counselor: What does this change mean in your real life?
D: Being able to enter my parents’ house when my brothers and their families are there and to say hello to them.
Feelings: Patience, stability, steadiness

Her reconstruction also shows improvement in her ability to behave differently—staying stable instead of disengaging and disconnecting from her family. It allowed her to be aware of another strategy she can use in her relationships with her family.
The following illustrates an intervention working with dreams.

A dream: My nephew started to work as a real estate agent. My parents brought him two exclusive properties to sell. I was mad at them. I asked why they did it, since it is my work too. They answered, “You don’t know, he has two children.” I answered, “It doesn’t matter because I am your daughter and this is my livelihood, and he has his parents to care for him.”
Feelings: Betrayal

This dream showed little improvement in her basic thinking. She still felt betrayed and threatened whenever she had to share her parents with other family members.
In the dream reconstruction, the counselor asked her, “As director of this dream, try to change it in a way that all participants will feel good.”
She suggested two changes:

1. “I would ask my parents to give me one property and give the other to my nephew.”
2. "My parents come to offer me the two properties, and I offered to give it to my nephew because he needs their help more than I do."

Feelings: Love, care, giving

Both changes show improvement in her social interest. In her first suggested change, she saw herself as equal and without special status. In the second change, we see high social interest when she is able to think about someone else's needs. In other words, the dream reconstruction showed she is able to think differently. She was able to share her parents with another family member, although still in an imaginary manner, but also as an operational way of behaving.

Naturopathic Treatment

At some point in the sessions, D became overloaded with obsessive thoughts, aggressive behavior, deep depression, anger, bitterness, and physical symptoms such as palpitations, which caused distress and harmed the therapeutic process. She refused to accept the idea of psychiatric help and so we advised her to try naturopathic treatment. She agreed, and received the treatment. The treatment helped her calm down and feel better, with less anger and much less depression. This improvement allowed her to progress in the therapeutic process.

Changing Strategies to Belong

All D's memories and dreams indicated that her desperate need to belong was due to thinking she had to be the center of attention. She had developed this strategy to feel she belongs, but it did not work in her mature life. It resulted in her addiction to pain and feeling inferior. Thus, the idea of therapy was to help her develop new, more productive ways to belong. In the sessions, the therapist confronted her with the need to change the old strategy, which brought about considerable progress. Gradually, D adopted more constructive ways to belong. She started to understand herself better. She realized she had behaved like a child and decided she did not want to be a little girl anymore. She stopped interfering and getting involved in things that were none of her business and took responsibility for the damage her behavior caused to her feelings of belonging, as well as to those of her husband and children.

Training in Social Interest

To encourage D to move from a narcissistic viewpoint to that of a woman with better social interest skills, we worked with her to realize and accept the idea that other people think and feel differently from her. We tried to broaden her ability to see things through other people's eyes; to consider how they think and feel; to understand she has to reflect and respect others'
wishes instead of focusing only on her own feelings, thoughts, and desires. Because, according to her ERs, she had the ability to consider others' needs, it was relatively easy. The idea of the therapy was to help her remove her fixed condition for belonging—that is, to be the favorite, the center. Adler wrote about social interest:

It is an attitude quite different from what we find in a person whom we call antisocial, as if it were the expression only of an acquired way of life. It is much more than that. We are not in a position to define it quite unequivocally, but we have found in an English author [Edward Spranger] a phrase which clearly expresses what we could contribute to an explanation: “To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another.” For the time being, this seems to me an admissible definition of what we call social feeling. (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 135)

D learned how to relate to others and consider their wants, to think before acting out her thoughts and feelings, and to understand she does not have to be the center all the time. Her change was reflected through her significantly improved relationship with her parents and willingness to reconcile with her brothers, sisters-in-law, and nephews. The change also affected her relationship with her husband.

The Current Picture

D recently brought the following ER and dream, which indicate her mental situation:

**ER Age 11:** It was a Bar Mitzvah party of my cousin (male). My cousin (female) had a plaid shirt, and I wanted to have a shirt like that. I really wanted it very much and asked my parents to buy me the same.
- Focus: A family event and clothes
- Feelings: Near and far

A dream: My father was sitting near my husband on a long bench and said hello to him. Then he said, I don’t want him to stay at my house. I was angry with my father and said to myself, why does he need to say it, he already said hello. Why couldn’t he stop with hello? He started to set a fire.
- Focus: My husband sits near my father, and my father says hello to him
- Feelings: Come on, let’s overcome

D had indicated that her problem started when her brothers married. As mentioned before, she conditions her feeling of belonging with being the favorite. When her brothers married, she started to feel jealousy toward her sisters-in-law because she feared her special place in the family would be lost. In the first stage of the process, the jealousy involved herself, her
parents, and her sisters-in-law. Then, the jealousy became envy. When her feeling of belonging could not be reached through jealousy, she wished to attack her sisters-in-law so they would no longer have the quality she envied. Now, her envy involved only two elements: herself and her sisters-in-law.

Conversely, in the ER, envy became jealousy. D was jealous of her female cousin and wanted what she had—a plaid shirt. She did not feel envy, which could have manifested by the aim to destroy her cousin over a shirt D did not have. Based on Shifron and Bettner’s (2014) definition of jealousy and envy, from a therapeutic point of view, returning to a state of jealousy (which was from the beginning the basis of her envy) is a satisfying result; now, instead of wanting to destroy the other person, D wants to have the same. Jealousy, by this definition, is a legitimate wish that may motivate D to achieve something she wants in a more constructive way—in this case, by asking her parents to buy her a shirt. Change from envy to jealousy is also an important therapeutic target counselors should aim to achieve when working with clients dealing with envy. It is a crucial stage in therapy.

In D’s dream, she says, “I really want that there will be an end to the story, and I want to overcome and to proceed,” which shows an improved mental situation. Unfortunately, from time to time, D falls into a trap because she still has “a box of matches in her pocket.” Whenever she has the opportunity, she sets a (metaphorical) fire, as manifested in the incidents she brought to the sessions.

We described the therapeutic process graphically in Figure 1.

Looking back, we can describe the following therapeutic process:

D came to treatment complaining of nervous breakdowns, depression, and aggressive behavior toward her family. We characterized her symptoms as envy. The first stage of the work had two main purposes:

1. Making her understand that her destructive behavior damages her wellbeing and her need to belong.
2. Helping her recognize her destructive strategies.

Her progress was due to the contribution of these two purposes. Through the therapeutic process, she understood she must restrain herself. Unfortunately, she occasionally could not resist and had bad temper outbursts.

As explained in the introduction, from Adlerians’ point of view both envy and aggressive behavior are strategies people use to feel they are valued and belong when they are not aware of other, more constructive possibilities. No one can leave a well-working strategy before finding a better one. Although D learned to maintain restraint when the situation was hard for her, she still does not know how to communicate negative emotions in a way that allows empathy and closeness. Thus, from time to time, D cannot maintain restraint and uses the “box of matches” to “set a fire.”
Figure 1. Therapeutic process in two stages. Stage 1: Helping the client understand her lifestyle and strategies to feel that she belongs. Stage 2: Improving the client’s emotional and verbal ability to express her needs.

The second stage of the therapeutic process should concentrate on improving D’s emotional and verbal ability to express her need to belong in a way that allows empathy and connection. This stage involves a long and wearisome learning. We hope D will be as persistent in the second stage as she was in the first.

Summary

In this paper, our goal was to present an Adlerian conceptualization and an Adlerian therapeutic intervention with a case of envy. We presented a case study of a woman who suffered from an envy problem. Envy was defined in Adlerian “language” as a goal ill-used to reach a sense of belonging. In the case study, envy was the consequence of inferior feelings. It was the special place our client designed for herself to feel valuable and to belong.
Envy may occur even with imagined or inconceivable competition (Schoeck, 1969). The envying person has a causal delusion that sees the envied person as the cause of painful failure.

Some aggression and torment are somewhat masochistically turned back upon the subject, as happened in our case study. Thus, the therapeutic intervention should include working with the client’s lifestyle.

The goal for therapy in this case study was to help D develop a sense of social interest. Therapy using Adlerian work with ERs and reconstruction techniques allowed D to recognize the difficulties she created in her “narcissistic” strategy. She started in a new direction with more willingness to look and behave with social interest rather than only self-interest. Working with clients with envy should also refer to the way they interpret life’s events, through working on their lifestyle and behavior choices to feel valued and belonging.

The case study illustrates two stages of work with envy. The first stage concentrates on showing the client her strengths and how she used them destructively. We helped the client understand how her lifestyle and strategy to reach belonging damaged her self-esteem and sense of belonging. This stage led to self-improvement. The client developed restraint, but still has bad temper outbursts from time to time because she has not learned new, constructive ways to express her emotions. The second stage is a long, wearisome learning process. It focuses on improving D’s emotional and verbal ability to express the need to belong in a way that allows empathy and connection with others. In place of her aggressive and offensive behavior, she could see and understand the other person. In summary, the second stage emphasizes learning constructive strategies to belong.

Importantly, when working with clients dealing with envy, a change from feelings of envy to a more legitimate jealousy indicates significant progress in the change process. It indicates a change from wanting to destroy another person who has something the client does not have, to wanting to have the same. Everyone can change, said psychiatrist Victor E. Frankl (1959/1962), who established the basis for existential psychology. Even the most appallingly maltreated and handicapped person is able to extract new strength for the future. The belief that everyone can change is the optimistic concept in Adlerian theory and practice.

The case study in this paper was challenging. When dealing with envy, the therapeutic process is long and must be handled with understanding, care, and encouragement. We hope to see more articles and case studies on envy because of its importance and widespread existence and its potential to ruin individuals, families, and societies.

Future therapy stages for D will focus on her marital relationship.
References


Aviva Dolev, BA Psychology, MBA Organization Behaviour, is a psychotherapist in private practice, certified by the Israeli Association of Focused Psychotherapy. This paper is the outcome of Dolev’s work as a supervisee with Rachel Shifron as clinical supervisor.

Rachel Shifron, PhD, is a counseling psychologist, a certified family, couples and vocational therapist, and an addiction specialist. In addition to her private practice, she is senior lecturer in a postgraduate three-year program in Adlerian Psychotherapy at the Adler Institute in Israel. She is Column Editor of *The Journal of Individual Psychology* and has been on the faculty of ICASSI for the last 29 years.