

An Early-Recollections Skill-Building Workshop

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Abstract

A person's early recollections provide valuable clues to his or her lifestyle. In this article the author describes an experiential workshop format meant to assist participants in enhancing clinical diagnostic skills. It is based on previously published research (Mosak & Kopp, 1973) and includes a brief section on interpretative guidelines.

The projective nature and the simplicity with which a person will generally disclose an early recollection (ER) make using it a powerful counseling technique. ERs help identify the basic existential conclusions a person has formed about himself or herself, others, and life in general. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) observed that

Most illuminating of all is the way the individual begins his story; the earliest incident he can recall. The first memory will show his fundamental view of life, his first satisfactory crystallization of his attitude. It offers us an opportunity to see at one glance what he has taken as the starting point for his development. (p. 351)

Shulman and Mosak (1988) have noted that

ERs are not considered correct records of actual facts, but alterations from fact were for Adler evidence of creative tendencies in the memories which were cognitively consistent with the subject's own life goal and own private way of assigning meaning and value to the various aspects of existence. (p. 63)

They also noted that Adler was able to gain clinically salient insights from ERs on such issues as the person's basic attitude toward life; hints as to why a particular direction or strategy was adopted; compensatory devices developed to cope with perceived inadequacies; courage or lack thereof; preferred modes of coping; preferred interpersonal transactions; the presence or absence of social interest; and core wants, needs, values, and motivators.

In 1973 Mosak and Kopp wrote an insightful article titled, "The Early Recollections of Adler, Freud and Jung." The present article adapts that contribution to a skill-building classroom or workshop setting in which participants gain skill in discovering how ERs reflect the basic personality and later theories of Freud, Jung, and Adler. For the past year I have field

tested the following design in graduate counseling courses and in regional and national Adlerian-based training workshops in the United States.

Overview of the Workshop

Participants are randomly assigned to subgroups in which they will be given a set of two or three ERs. An instructor begins by providing a minilecture featuring suggested ER interpretative guidelines (see Appendix A). Participants then work in their subgroups to establish key wants, needs, and motivators for each ER. Participants then review the clinical observations of Mosak and Kopp (1973). Participants are informed that another subgroup has the other half of the same individual's ERs. They are then to make an appropriate match by finding the subgroup with the other half of their theorist's ERs.

After reading a brief biography of Adler, Freud, and Jung (see Appendix B), the participants are told that the sets of ERs belong to the three prominent theorists. Their next task is to identify which ERs belong to what theorist.

Finally, the instructor leads a discussion of the activity. Specific implications and applications for counseling conclude the workshop.

Preparation of Materials

Prior to the workshop, 12 packets are created. The first six packets contain the ERs; the remaining six packets contain suggested interpretative materials. I have found that using packets of different colors helps keep the process organized.

ER Packet 1 (Subgroup 3). [Age 2] I remember sitting on a beach banded up on account of rickets, with my healthy elder brother sitting opposite me. He could run, jump, and move about quite effortlessly, while for me, movement of any sort was a strain and an effort. Everyone went to great pains to help me and my mother and father did all that was in their power to do.

[Age 3] My parents left us two boys for a few days in the care of a governess. When they came back I met them, singing a street-song, the words of which are in my mind today, as is the melody to which I sang it. The song was about a woman who explained that she couldn't eat chicken because she was so hurt by the killing of her little hen. At this, the singer asks how she can have such a soft heart, when she thinks nothing of throwing a flowerpot at her husband's head.

[Age 4 or 5] I had pneumonia. The doctor, who had suddenly been

called in, told my father that there was no point in going to the trouble of looking after me as there was no hope of my living. At once a frightful terror came over me and a few days later when I was well I decided definitely to become a doctor so that I should have a better defense against the danger of death and weapons to combat it superior to my doctor's.

ER Packet 2 (Subgroup 4). [Age 5–7] The father of one of my playmates, a lampmaker, asked me what I was going to be in life. "A doctor," I said. He answered, "Then you should be strung up at once to the nearest lamp-post." This remark made no adverse impression upon my choice of a profession: I merely thought, "There's another who's had a bad time at the hands of a doctor. But I shall be a *real* doctor."

[Age 5] I found that I could not quite believe in the Angel of the Passover visiting each Jewish home and being able to distinguish which was the leavened and which the unleavened bread prepared for him. Therefore, one Passover night after the rest of the family had gone to bed, I crept downstairs in my nightshirt and substituted leavened for unleavened bread, sitting up for the rest of the night in a cupboard with the door ajar, to discover through the crack the effect upon the Angel. Nor was I altogether surprised when the Angel did not turn up.

[Age not given] I remember that the path to the school led over a cemetery. I was frightened every time and was exceedingly put out at beholding the other children pass the cemetery without paying the least attention to it, while every step I took was accompanied by a feeling of fear and horror. Apart from the extreme discomfort occasioned by this fear, I was also annoyed at the idea of being less courageous than the others. One day I made up my mind to put an end to this fear of death. Again, I decided on a treatment of hardening. I stayed at some distance behind the others, placed my school-bag on the ground near the wall of the cemetery and ran across it a dozen times, until I felt that I had mastered the fear. After that, I believe, I passed along this path without any fear.

ER Packet 3 (Subgroup 2). [Age 2] I would still wet my bed, and it was my father . . . who reproved me. I recollect saying on one of these occasions: "Don't worry, Papa, I will buy you a beautiful new red bed."

[Age 2 1/2] My Nannie disappeared . . . Having reason to suspect my brother's implication in the disappearance . . . I asked him what had become of her and received the . . . answer: "*Sie ist eiugekastelt.*" An adult would have understood this as meaning: "She has been locked up in prison," but I took it more literally as "She has been put in a chest."

[Age 3] On the way to Leipzig the train passed through Breslau, where I saw gas jets for the first time; they made me think of souls burning in hell.

ER Packet 4 (Subgroup 6). [Age 6] I was expected to believe that we were all made of earth and must therefore return to earth. This did not suit me and I expressed doubts of the doctrine. My mother thereupon rubbed the palms

of her hands together . . . and showed me the blackish scales of *epidermis* produced by the friction as a proof that we were made of earth . . . I acquiesced in the belief which I was later to hear expressed in the words: "Thou owest Nature a death."

[Age 7 or 8] I recall having urinated (deliberately) in my parent's bedroom and being reprimanded by my father, who said, "You will never amount to anything."

ER Packet 5 (Subgroup 5). [Age about 4] Strangers, bustle, excitement. The maid comes running and exclaims, "The fishermen have found a corpse—came down the Falls—they want to put it in the wash house!" My father says, "Yes, yes." I want to see the dead body at once. My mother holds me back and sternly forbids me to go into the garden. When all the men had left, I quickly stole into the garden to the washhouse. But the door was locked. I went around the house; at the back there was an open drain running down the slope, and I saw blood and water trickling out. I found this extraordinarily interesting.

[Age 3 or 4] One hot summer day I was sitting alone, as usual, on the road in front of the house, playing in the sand. . . . Looking up the road, I saw a figure in a strangely broad hat and a long black garment coming down from the wood. It looked like a man wearing women's clothes. Slowly the figure drew nearer, and I could now see that it really was a man wearing a kind of black robe that reached to his feet. At the sight of him I was overcome with fear, which rapidly grew into deadly terror as the frightful recognition shot through my mind: "That is a Jesuit." The man coming down the road must be in disguise, I thought that was why he wore women's clothes. Probably he had evil intentions. Terrified, I ran helter-skelter into the house, rushed up the stairs, and hid under a beam in the darkest corner of the attic. . . .

[Age about 6] An aunt showed me the stuffed animals in the museum. We stayed a long time, because I wanted to look at everything very carefully. At 4 o'clock, the bell rang, a sign that the museum was about to close. My aunt nagged at me, but I could not tear myself away from the showcases. In the meantime, the room had been locked, and we had to go by another way to the staircase, through the gallery of antiquities. Suddenly I was standing before these marvelous figures! Utterly overwhelmed, I opened my eyes wide, for I had never seen anything so beautiful . . . My aunt pulled me by the hand to the exit, crying out, "Disgusting boy, shut your eyes! Disgusting boy, shut your eyes!" Only then did I see that the figures were naked and wore fig leaves. I hadn't noticed it at all before.

ER Packet 6 (Subgroup 1). [Age 2 or 3] A lovely summer evening. An aunt said to me, "Now I am going to show you something." She took me out in front of the house . . . On the far horizon the chain of the Alps lay

bathed in glowing sunset reds. The Alps could be seen very clearly that evening. "Now look over there . . . the mountains are all red." For the first time I consciously saw the Alps. Then I was told that the next day the village children would be going on a school outing to the Alps, near Zurich. I wanted so much to go, too. To my sorrow, I was informed that children as small as I could not go along; there was nothing to be done about it. From then on the Alps and Zurich became an unattainable land of dreams, near to the glowing, snow-covered mountains.

[Age about 4] I am restive, feverish, unable to sleep. My father carries me in his arms, paces up and down, singing his old student songs. I particularly remember one I was especially fond of and which always used to soothe me. To this day I can remember my father's voice, singing over me in the stillness of the night.

[Age about 4] Fourteen people were drowned and were carried down by the yellow flood water to the Rhine. When the water retreated, some of the corpses got stuck in the sand. When I was told about it, there was no holding me. I actually found the body of a middle-aged man, in a black frock coat; apparently he had just come from church. He lay half covered by sand, his arm over his eyes.

Interpretations Packet 7 (Subgroup 3). This recollection expresses an attitude that "I am deficient. In comparison to others, I find myself wanting." The movement and actions of a person are important. There is a payoff for organ inferiority: Others become involved; others are showing social interest.

Actions speak louder than words; you can profess good intentions but you will be judged by your actions. There is also concern for good human relations. There is an interest in music.

I am incapacitated and this brings the concern of others. There is fear of dying. It is terrifying when people lose hope or are pessimistic. I resolve to compensate by learning appropriate skills. I later stated: "The recollection of sickness or death is occasionally linked . . . with the attempt to become better equipped to meet them, possible as a doctor or a nurse."

Interpretations Packet 8 (Subgroup 4). People's criticisms make no impact—in fact, they strengthen personal resolve. A *real* doctor does not give patients a hard time. Rather, one shows an interest in outcome, in the future.

I am skeptical of the beliefs of others, especially in regard to religion. Experiments and observations will be utilized in an effort to find the truth.

I am afraid of death. I can overcome fear by taking action. Again—I compare myself to others and come out on the short end. Fear inhibits one's movement and indicates that I am "less than."

Interpretations Packet 9 (Subgroup 2). This recollection carries the

message: "Words speak louder than actions—don't look at my deeds, notice instead my good intentions." It also includes concern with a specific organic function and a father-son controversy. The mention of color in a recollection is generally considered to indicate an aesthetic interest.

I am looking for answers, and, upon receiving an answer, I interpret it in an unusual way, a way that differs from the conventional meaning.

There is an interest in symbolism and in religion.

Interpretations Packet 10 (Subgroup 6). I am skeptical of statements made by others but will acquiesce when shown "evidence." There are concerns with death, particularly with its inevitability.

I am deliberately provocative and evoke negative attention. Others will judge me negatively. In addition there are the organic function and the father-son controversy of ER 1.

Interpretations Packet 11 (Subgroup 5). I find death interesting. Women try to prevent the satisfaction of that curiosity. I don't give up. I am determined to have my way.

I am trying to reconcile discrepant observations. I correct my conclusions on the basis of closer observations. The statement that I am alone "as usual" suggests that being alone is characteristic for me. When I am terrified, I run and hide. There is confusion with respect to religion and perhaps masculinity and femininity. Either Catholicism, the confusion, or both frighten me.

I am observing again. A woman is interfering with my aesthetic searches. I focus on the artistic beauty in things, where others may only see the erotic-sexual aspects. Some people make excessive fuss regarding sexual matters.

Interpretations Packet 12 (Subgroup 1). Someone is opening the world to me. Becoming conscious of things is important. The mention of color suggests an artistic orientation. I am little and left out because of it; I do not get to the Promised Land.

Others soothe me when I'm uncomfortable. I am sensitive to voice quality and music. I am interested in contrast and opposites.

While death horrifies others, it interests me. I am not afraid to look where others are afraid. Once again, color suggests an artistic sense. Am I saying that church-goers can come to a horrible end?

Conducting the Workshop

The instructor should begin the workshop by stating the objectives and by giving a brief description of the total process.

1. Divide the class into six subgroups. Assemble the respective numbers to form groups.

2. Distribute the respective ER packets to the following subgroups: Packet 1 to Subgroup 3; Packet 2 to Subgroup 4; Packet 3 to Subgroup 2; Packet 4 to Subgroup 6; Packet 5 to Subgroup 5; and Packet 6 to Subgroup 1.

3. Provide a theoretical overview to some suggested guidelines. (See Appendix A.)

4. Allow subgroups to spend 15–20 minutes seeking consensus on the representative ERs.

5. Distribute the interpretations packets as follows: Packet 7 to Subgroup 3; Packet 8 to Subgroup 4, Packet 9 to Subgroup 2, Packet 10 to Subgroup 6; Packet 11 to Subgroup 5; and Packet 12 to Subgroup 1. Participants compare and contrast their generated responses to Mosak and Kopp's suggested interpretations.

6. Instruct subgroup members to find the "other half" of ERs from the same individual. They should first discuss in their own subgroup what specific themes, motivators, wants, or other issues they might seek in successfully finding their other half. After reading a brief commentary on the lives of each of these theorists, they discuss how one of the theorist's personality and theory may be reflected in the various ERs. They then match their ERs with those of another group. (Instructors may want to suggest a structured way to visit other groups, such as sending one person to the other five groups. I prefer a more unstructured approach which is later included in the processing of the workshop.) The correct pairings are Subgroup 1 with Subgroup 5, Subgroup 2 with Subgroup 6, and Subgroup 3 with Subgroup 4.

7. Share with participants the biographical sketches of Adler, Freud, and Jung (Appendix B), and instruct them to discuss in their three newly formed subgroups which theorist their ERs belong to. The correct identities are Adler for Subgroups 3 and 4, Freud for Subgroups 2 and 6, and Jung for Subgroups 1 and 5.

8. Allow each of the newly formed subgroups to take 10 minutes to prepare a presentation to the total group focusing on how the personalities and theories of their respective theorists are reflected in the ERs. Specifically, how were their eventual systems of psychology reflected in their formative childhood memories?

9. Discuss major learning surprises and general themes discovered by the participants. Be sure to include the theory that within all ERs are both our "clinical shadow" as well as our "contributing assets." I also suggest that someone read Adler's last ER about the graveyard aloud to the entire class. The instructor can then comment that years later when Adler revisited his childhood home, he was unable to locate the terrifying graveyard. Indeed, no such graveyard had actually ever existed. However, prior to that visit, Adler was certain that such a graveyard was there. It was his own creation in his mind that convinced him of the reality of an "objective"

graveyard. Thus, ERs represent a reconstruction and not a photograph of a person's early developmental experiences.

10. Distribute and discuss Mosak and Kopp's (1973) article.

11. Conclude by describing implications and applications, and include an encouragement to participants that no matter what particular theory or theories they use in their own counseling practice, obtaining a client's ERs is a rich source of therapeutic information.

Appendix A: Suggestions for Interpretation of Early Recollections

Specific ER interpretative guidelines are described by Eckstein and Baruth (1996), Powers and Griffith (1987), and Shulman and Mosak (1988).

Shulman and Mosak (1988) identified the following common thematic topics found in ERs: dethronement (the birth of a younger sibling or another person entering who takes center stage), surprises, obstacles, affiliation, security, skill tasks dependency, external authority, self-control, status, gender nurturance, confusion, luck, sickness, and death. The second part of the ER, the subject's feeling and identifying what was most vivid about the ER, gives valuable insight into what the person concluded about the event, the "therefore . . ."

Kaplan (1985) suggested the following ten questions be answered relative to ERs:

1. Who is present in the recollection?
2. Who is remembered with affection?
3. Who is disliked in the recollection?
4. What problem(s) is (are) confronted in the recollection?
5. What special talent(s) or ability is (are) revealed in the recollection?
6. Is the recollection generally pleasant or unpleasant?
7. What is the client's level of activity in the recollection?
8. What emotion does the client feel and/or show pertaining to the recollection?
9. What does the recollection suggest to you about the client's social interest?
10. What fictional goal or goals is (are) implied in the recollection?

Appendix B: Brief Biographical Sketches of Adler, Freud, and Jung

I constructed these summaries based on Hergenbahn and Olson (1999).

Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler was born outside of Vienna, Austria, in 1870. His father, Leopold, was a moderately successful grain merchant. Adler grew up in a comfortable physical environment, enjoying nature, music, and the cultural opportunities of Vienna.

Despite physical comfort, Adler described his childhood as miserable. He felt he was undersized and ugly when compared to his peers. He was the second of seven children, and he had a rivalry with his more athletic and "model child" older brother. He felt his mother preferred the older brother to him.

Adler experienced many physical challenges as a child. He suffered from rickets and consequently did not engage in much physical activity. At age 5, he caught pneumonia and almost died. This experience, coupled with the death of a younger brother in the bed next to his when he was 3 and his being run over twice, created an intense fear of death for him. He resolved to become a physician, believing that doing so would be a way of conquering death.

Adler found school to be challenging, particularly mathematics. In fact, one of his teachers urged his parents to train him as a shoemaker. Nonetheless, Adler later became a gifted student, and he received his medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1895. He first specialized in diseases of the eye, but then he changed to general practice and finally psychiatry. Two years after graduating from medical school, he married Raissa Epstein, a powerful militant socialist. Marxism as it involved hard working conditions and the need for socialized medicine influenced Adler's first publications. From Marx, Adler learned the important role that one's social context plays in personality formation.

The Adlers had four children. One of their daughters, Alexandria, and their only son, Kurt, both became psychiatrists who later carried on their father's work.

After writing a defense of Freud's book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Adler was invited and accepted an invitation to become one of Freud's colleagues in 1902 as a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. He became president of that group in 1910, a year before his official break with Freud. The two men never met again after 1911.

After breaking with Freud, Adler founded the Society of Free Psychoanalytic Research, demonstrating the break from what he felt was the oppression of Freud's methods. However, he soon changed the name to the Society of Individual Psychology to avoid being labeled as just rebels against psychoanalysis. He chose that term to imply that although individuals are unique, inner harmony and a striving to cooperate with others also distinguish them.

Adler was a physician in the Austrian army during World War I. He was later asked by the government to open several child-guidance clinics in Vienna.

In 1926 Adler visited the United States, where he was warmly received. After being a lecturer at Columbia University in 1927, he became a professor of medical psychology at Long Island College of Medicine in 1932. Partly because of the Nazi takeover in Austria, Adler made the United States his permanent home in 1935. He died of a heart attack in Aberdeen, Scotland, while on a lecture tour.

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud was born on 6 May 1856 in Freiberg, Austria. At the age of 4, Freud and his family moved to Vienna, where he lived for the next 80 years. His father, Jakob, was a wool merchant and a strict authoritarian. At Freud's birth his father was 40; his mother, Amalia Nathansohn (his father's third wife), was 20. Freud was the first of eight children born to the couple over a 10-year period. When Sigmund was 2 years old, his 7-month-old brother died. Sigmund and his mother had a strong relationship; he attributed much of his success to his mother's faith in him.

Freud graduated from medical school at the University of Vienna at age 25. He chose medical school because it was one of the few careers then open to a Jew in Austria.

After publishing several articles on neurology, Freud entered as a clinical neurologist in 1886. That same year he married Martha Bernays, to whom he had been engaged since 1882. During the four-year engagement, he wrote more than 400 letters to his fiancée; they remained married until his death. The Freuds had six children, three of each gender. His daughter, Anna, became a famous child psychiatrist in London. The Nazis in Austria killed four of Freud's sisters.

Freud experimented with cocaine; he took it himself and freely prescribed it for patients and friends. When cocaine was shown to be highly addictive, Freud's close association with it led his medical colleagues to be critical of his later psychological ideas. Although Freud did not become addicted to cocaine, he did become addicted to nicotine, and he smoked an average of 20 cigars a day for most of his adult life.

Freud began his own self-analysis in 1897. In addition to refining his own theory, he began self-analysis because of his fear of railroad travel and because of his obsessions with his own death. Such analysis led to publication in 1900 of what is generally considered to be his greatest work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

In 1923 Freud was diagnosed with cancer of the mouth. From then until his death in 1939, he underwent 33 operations. Because of his

refusal to take pain-reducing medication, he was in great physical pain, although his mind remained alert. He died on 23 September 1939.

Carl Jung

Carl Gustav Jung was born on 26 July 1875, in the Swiss village of Kesswyl. Religion was a major theme in his early years. His father, Paul Jung, was a pastor in the Swiss Reformed Church, and his mother, Emile Preiswerk Jung, was the daughter of a theologian. As a child, when Jung asked his father penetrating questions on religion, it became clear to him that his father's faith was built predominantly on church dogma and not a genuinely real personal religious experience. In Jung's later work, religion of a personal inner emotional experience was a major part of his theory.

Jung considered his mother to be the dominant member of the family. However, he saw her as very inconsistent with two different polarities. One was kind, hospitable, and humorous; the other was uncanny and ruthless. Like his mother, Jung described himself as really two different people, "number one," the schoolboy, and "number two," the wise old man. He later determined that these labels represented his ego or conscious mind and his unconscious mind, respectively.

Because of his parents' constant quarrels, as a child, Jung turned inward to his dreams, visions, and fantasies. At age 10, he carved a wooden figurine in the shape of a man. In times of trouble, he would visit his secret friend. At school he wrote in a secret language on spools of paper he placed in his pencil case with his wooden mannequin.

Jung received his medical degree in 1900. He had specialized in psychiatry in general and the occult in particular.

In 1903 Jung married Emma Rauschenback; they raised four daughters and a son. During middle age Jung had a lengthy affair with Toni Wolfe, a former patient. Although his wife was initially upset, a triangular relationship was eventually established among Jung, his wife, and his mistress.

Jung met Freud in 1906. Because of a close personal and professional friendship over the next seven years, Freud decided Jung would be his successor. However, Jung broke with Freud when the latter refused to share his personal dreams, saying, "I cannot risk my authority." Jung also disagreed with Freud's emphasis on the sexual preoccupation of the libido. Jung broke with Freud at age 40, entering a period of four years he later called "the dark years," during which he was on the brink of madness. Jung emerged from his creative illness with his own theory of personality. Jung's *Collected Works* consist of 20 volumes. He died at age 86 in 1961 at his home in Bollington, Switzerland.

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