



Excuses, Excuses!¹

George W. Linden

We tend to think that we give good reasons for our behavior but that other people make excuses. This is self-deception. We all make excuses because often there is a discrepancy between the goals of our private logic and the ironclad law of social living. As Rudolf Dreikurs said, normal individuals know what they "should do, what is right and wrong, how one should behave and act" (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 124). We know that to act in a given way would be to follow common sense, to participate in the "general ideas, in values and morals accepted by the whole group to which we belong," which is what Dreikurs meant by "common sense" (1967, pp. 123-124). Nevertheless, we often act according to our private understanding and not in accordance with common sense. Then "the Private Sense, as Adler called it, conflicts with the general rules of common understanding" (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 124).

Behavior is usually a result of a mixture of common sense and private logic. When there is a discrepancy between the personal goals of private logic and the objective demands of public logic, we create excuses. By doing so, we attempt to conceal our personal goals and make it appear that we are primarily pursuing a societal goal. Most of this creative thinking is done without awareness.

We can say that an excuse is the price that private logic pays to common sense. The private logic of each of us differs, but we all want to minimize the price that such conflict costs. We hope that alibis or excuses will allow us to do what we want to do without having to pay a heavy price.

There is a continuum to this cost reduction. The greater the discrepancy between societal demands and personal goals, the more private logic is

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involved and the deeper the resulting excuse. Certain comedians such as Flip Wilson and Steve Martin have built their careers on exploiting superficial excuses.

A deeper form of excuse is found in the dynamic of the spoiled child. Such a one has learned to exploit the social interest of others, to render them his servants, and to transgress the rules. He then "joins the forces of good and displays his own deepest regrets" as he "pleads for acquittal by virtue of remorse" (Mosak, 1977, p. 174). In ordinary logic, this is known as the appeal to pity, the *ad miseracordium* argument. The extreme of this is the boy who kills both his parents and then throws himself on the mercy of the court because he is an orphan.

An even deeper level of excuse is the creation of a neurosis. Dreikurs (1967) describes the process this way:

The neurotic person meets the conflict by hiding his Private Sense from his consciousness, by not admitting his own tendencies when they conflict with his conscience, his Common Sense. He looks for alibis to excuse his social shortcomings. If this description is correct, and we have every reason to believe it is, then it leads to the conclusion that we are all neurotic, fundamentally and structurally. It is then only a question of degree whether our alibis and our lack of social participation are more, or less, conspicuous and impressive. (p. 124)

Since excuses are not only means of concealing our true intentions but also modes of social withdrawal, perhaps the ultimate excuse for avoiding the problems of life, the "most intensive safeguard" for not playing our part in social living is, as Adler states, "suicide" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 297).

Though there is a continuum of excuses, there are differences of degree. For purposes of discussion, it seems that these differences of degree can be treated as kinds. The more private logic is involved, the more withdrawal there is from societal demands, the deeper the excuse. Though no exact line can be drawn, excuses may be classified as being first-level excuses, second-level, and third-level excuses.

First-level excuses are everyday excuses. These are immediate, situational, and often superficial excuses. They are grounded in the present and may be used to justify present, past, or future actions. Here the private logic is not as deeply involved and there is less distancing from social interest. The primary purpose of first-level excuse is to maintain a favorable self-image both for ourselves and others. First-level excuses often are informal fallacies and utilize such devices as projection, semantic redefinition, reversal of cause-effect relationships, false cause, hasty generalization, disconnection of cause and effect, and other such strategies.

C. R. Snyder describes some of the moves people make in the con-

struction of excuses (1984, pp. 50–55). Snyder sees excuses as devices for coping with disappointing outcomes or bad performances—actions that fail to meet either the “individual’s or society’s standards” (1984, p. 50). Snyder, like an Adlerian, sees “self-esteem” as a “driving force for most of us” (1984, p. 50). This, I believe, is half the story. For an Adlerian, one strives to attain both high self-esteem and strong social interest. It is the move toward social interest that allows us to strive for equality and a sense of belonging. Since Snyder does not emphasize the goal of social interest and since striving for self-esteem may be a striving for false superiority, I would classify Snyder’s excuses as first-level excuses.

According to Snyder, our strategies for lessening negative implications of first-level excuses are of three general types: denial, diminishment, and temporization—what he calls the “Yes-But” strategy. In denial, we break the linkage between the self and bad performance: “I didn’t do it” aims “to sever this causal connection” and to give “some clue to who (the real) culprit is” (Snyder, 1984, p. 52). This strategy of denying the act or its relation to the self is an attempt to avoid responsibility. Since Snyder’s main emphasis is upon maintaining self-image, he draws no distinction between responsibility and accountability. Responsibility is acknowledging one’s relationship to an action. Accountability is acknowledging one’s relationships to a person or people.

The second strategy, diminishing, accepts responsibility but attempts to soften or water-down the negative appearance of the act, to make it “seem not so bad” (Snyder, 1984, p. 52). The strategy of “diminishing” claims Snyder, takes two directions: reframing and reworking the standards. “Reframing,” he states, is a strategy to “consciously or unconsciously hide from yourself the undesirable consequences of your actions” (Snyder, 1984, p. 52), often claiming that one was unaware of what was going on. “Reworking” consists in either claiming that the standards for performance were vague and fuzzy or that the standards were set too high in the first place and hence are unfair.

In the third strategy, temporization, one admits responsibility for the act and that it was faulty, but one goes on to weaken accountability by appealing to extenuating circumstances. This often takes the “appeal to the people” (*ad populum*), or band wagon approach: “Others did just as poorly (or worse),” “Old people cannot remember things,” etc. The ploy here is to seek protection in the crowd through shared incompetence. Another “Yes-But” strategy is projection: other people, or some outside force made me do it. A third form of temporization, claims Snyder, consists of “consistency-lowering strategies” thus claiming that the situation was unusual either because “we didn’t try very hard” or because we lacked intent and “didn’t mean to do it” (Snyder, 1984, p. 53).

Although excuses may make us feel better, they do not alter the fact

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of the act. Furthermore, asserts Snyder, there are certain circumstances in which excuses do not work. If we use an excuse with a person who is extremely knowledgeable about the event, that person will not "buy" our excuse. If we become chronic excusers, our excuses are not believed by others and "Chronic excusers find themselves suffering from two bad performances—their original failure and their muffed attempt to excuse it" (Snyder, 1984, p. 54). Self-handicapping excuses, those used to avoid dealing with problems, such as insomnia or hypochondriasis, may become permanent strategies and "people can increasingly become stuck with the problem they have been exploiting." Snyder believes this may be particularly true of alcoholism because of the "excuse potential of drinking" (1984, p. 54).

Snyder does not believe that all excuses are total lies. They are merely products of our biased apperceptions. Nor does he believe that they are all bad. On the contrary, he points out some of the positive advantages of excuses. Excuses can and often do protect and/or bolster our self-image. And, as Snyder states, "By giving an excuse, we acknowledge the validity of the standards we have violated" (Snyder, 1984, p. 55). This acknowledgment of societal standards and common sense can serve as a social lubricant, easing our relationships with others, and it can provide us social space to take further chances, further risks.

Snyder's descriptions of excusing strategies are very useful. Another way of looking at first-level excuses is to see them in terms of logic. In logic, a distinction is drawn between formal (structural) and informal (semantic or syntactical) fallacies. Many first-level excuses may be classified as informal fallacies.

Having been a member of Weight Watchers for 15 years, I have heard many excuses. Some may be classified as informal fallacies. Here are a few examples:

1. *Semantic Redefinition*: "And what did you do when you went to the movie?" "I bought some popcorn." "But you promised to give up eating between meals." "Oh, but popcorn is not food, it's roughage!"

2. *Hasty Generalization and/or False Cause*: "The reason that the dresses in the shop are so small and don't fit is because they are all being sewed by those tiny Asian women."

3. *Reversal of Cause-Effect*: "Anxiety about food must be inherited. My children are driving me nuts." From an Adlerian point of view, the most common reversal of cause-effect is the appeal to feelings. I will return to this later.

4. *Disconnection of Cause-Effect*: "I cannot understand why I am not losing weight. I walk two miles every night!" "Where do you walk?" "To the Dairy Queen."

5. *Hidden Agenda*: Husband: "You will have to quit Weight Watchers, you are using too much hot water."

The other excuses were fairly obvious. The husband's, however, is fairly subtle and devious. This excuse is deeply in the area of the husband's private logic and will take a bit of unravelling.

The husband is making a demand on his wife; quit Weight Watchers. The "reason" or "excuse" is that she uses too much hot water. When does one use the most hot water? Certainly not when brushing one's teeth or washing one's hands. One uses the most hot water when taking a shower or bath.

According to the husband's private logic, when the wife was fat, she displaced more area in the tub. When she was fat, she used less water to take a bath. But now that she is thinner, there is less water displacement. She is using more hot water and thus driving up the water and heating bills.

Unless this woman is very unusual, she would take baths nude. So the husband is probably thinking of his wife nude. Nudity is often associated with sex. Hence, the husband is not concerned about fuel bills at all, but his private logic goes something like this: "When you were fat, you were not attractive. Now that you are thin, you are sexy. Other men may now be attracted to you. I cannot stand the threat of competition. Please quit Weight Watchers and get fat again so I can be secure in my masculinity and/or possessiveness." Here we have an excuse that demands a restoration of the past in order to negate the present and forestall a future (imagined) event. A few questions revealed that it was not the fuel bills that were inflated, but the husband's ego.

One of the most common excuses is the recourse to feelings. "Why did you do it?" "Because I was angry," "because I was jealous," "because I was afraid," etc. This strategy is particularly attractive to those who believe in introspective "touchy-feelie" psychology and base their world view on the premise: "I feel, therefore I am." But as Adlerians, we know that providing a feeling is not providing a reason. This strategy is a reversal of the cause-effect relationship. Feelings are not causes but consequences. We manufacture feelings in order to achieve our goals. Feelings are the fuel we use for movement. Adlerian psychology, as Dreikurs said, is "concerned with goals and not with causes" (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 68). We can promote change and motivations "to change" by "recognition of self-determined goals and purposes" (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 68). Feelings are not reasons, feelings are not explanations, feelings are not excuses, and as David Burns puts it bluntly, "Feelings are not facts" (Burns, 1981, p. 45).

Yet because feelings carry with them the "powerful illusion of truth" (Burns, 1981, p. 45), we often manufacture feelings in order to address or

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prevent addressing life's problems. If the feeling is the result of the goal, however, the feeling cannot be used to justify or validate the goal. Here we reach a deeper level of excuses, the second-level excuse.

Second-level excuses have greater involvement of private logic and personal goals hence they also imply a greater distance from social interest. First-level excuses are concerned mostly with accountability and thus preventing shame. Second-level excuses are more concerned with responsibility and often involve guilt. Second-level excuses often have recourse to the past in order to provide distance in the present and to avoid present problem solving. Sometimes they engender striving for superiority not over problems, but over people. The basic dynamic is one of withdrawal, avoidance, and the creation of a substitute goal, an excuse. This style of thinking leads us into sham battles with ourselves and "we soon reach a deadlock and become powerless to accomplish the very thing we were striving for" (Mosak, 1977, p. 104). As Harold Mosak states, many of us do not want freedom for that would mean accepting full responsibility for our behavior and:

We prefer a "good excuse" and are willing to suffer the pains of guilt feelings. But they, too, are only a pretense. Guilt feelings are the expression of good intentions which we do not really have. They always indicate an unwillingness to face up to a situation, using the excuse of a past transgression. (Mosak, 1977, pp. 104-105)

Dreikurs believed that this strategy was so important that he devoted an entire article to it: "Guilt Feelings as an Excuse" (1967, pp. 229-239).

Since we all transgress social rules now and then, guilt is an inevitable result of social living. Dreikurs was careful to draw a distinction, however, between guilt and guilt feelings. He pointed out that we may be guilty but not create guilt feelings and, "conversely, one may feel guilty without being so" (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 230). If we had a society of social equality, we would have no need for guilt feelings. In a hierarchical society, however, guilt feelings are a means of keeping "an inferior person or group in its place" (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 231). On the individual level, though most of us know how we ought to behave, we "do not act accordingly" (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 232) and consequently we manufacture guilt feelings for ourselves along with an active antisocial attitude. Dreikurs describes the process as:

... the average person has a well developed conscience, which does not prevent him from rebelling against obligations and social demands whenever they conflict with his personal goals, purposes and interests. We all use innumerable tricks to appease our own consciences or to excuse and rationalize our behavior so that our actions do not contradict our conscience too strongly, thus permitting ourselves to maintain the semblance of good intentions.

Children learn to avoid unpleasant consequences for their misdeeds by finding good excuses. This training enables them as adults always to find convincing alibis, to excuse themselves, no longer to their parents, but to their own consciences.

The arrangement of logical and ethical excuses for our actions is characteristic of all of us. (pp. 231–232)

As children, we learn that one of the pay-offs of guilt feelings is “moral enhancement.”

Whatever the child may have committed, he can make a favorable impression by admitting his guilt, preferably with an ostentatious display of regret and remorse. No misdeed is really so bad when a child can convincingly demonstrate how sorry he feels. Accepting one’s guilt becomes, therefore, a sign of high moral standards. (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 233)

Stepped up to a higher level of intensity, this creation of guilt feelings can become a neurotic strategy. Dreikurs (1967) described such a neurotic this way: “By feeling guilty, he is not only better than his actions would indicate, but even better than those who do not share the high moral standards he expresses in his self-accusations (p. 233). In reality, the neurotic trusts neither himself nor society. Hence when he is confronted with a current problem, he flees into the past and his private logic in order to avoid dealing with the present situation. It is important to choose a past transgression since the past cannot be changed. Dreikurs continued:

Guilt feelings, consequently are a clever scheme emphasizing actual or imagined past faulty actions for the purpose of justifying present mistaken attitudes. . . . It is always a present discouragement seeking proof in the past to justify a feeling of worthlessness and inadequacy. (p. 234)

Actually, the person is not feeling guilty, but inadequate, unable to confront the task. But it is much more comforting to be regarded as guilty than as incompetent. The purpose of such “guilt feelings” is to avoid change and exalt oneself over others. And, as Dreikurs added: “If we were to admit to ourselves their true meanings, they would become useless” (1967, p. 234). Dreikurs (1967) summarized his discussion admirably:

Guilt is unavoidable in a social order, but guilt feelings are not directly related to guilt. They are supposed to preserve conformity, but are mostly used to conceal defiance. The development of guilt feelings depends less on past transgressions than on present antagonistic intentions. They serve mainly as a proof of good intentions. They can be used to gain moral superiority. Their deceptive dynamics make them fit into a neurotic pattern. They are primarily a neurotic mechanism for maintaining good intentions in contrast to actual antisocial attitudes. They permit a shift of emphasis from the important present situation to the past, thereby providing relief from responsibility

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for present attitudes. They provoke unpleasant experiences which a discouraged individual anticipates. They prevent constructive action under the guise of remorse. (p. 239)

The dynamics of second-level excuses, it seems to me, are clear and so is the path of rehabilitation. Whether one is creating false humility, guilt feelings, or some other excuse due to a conflict between private and public goals, there is a felt discrepancy between one's self and self-ideal or between one's perception of one's self and the nature of the perceived environment or between one's personal moral code and one's self-concept. All of these, as Mosak (1977) states, can lead to inferiority feelings and these inferiority feelings:

... result in a loss of self-esteem, a loss of sense of personal worth. And since inferiority feelings always imply a comparison with others, possession of such feelings is coupled with a feeling of social isolation, of not belonging. The goal, then, of any psychological rehabilitation . . . would be to decrease inferiority feelings . . . to increase the individual's feeling of belonging. (p. 53)

From the viewpoint of private logic, comparisons, in this situation, are always invidious.

This brings us to the third and deepest level of excuses. The creation of an active antisocial attitude and the "fighting with windmills," the creation of fictional obstacles to avoid dealing with an imminent task. This is the level of illness: the creation and maintenance of neurotic symptoms (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 305). The depth of the illness will vary according to the degree of distance from social interest.

Third-level excuses lie heavily in the realm of private logic and operate without awareness. While for Freud neurotic symptoms were originally defense mechanisms of the relation of the repressed to the ego and later as protections of the ego against instinctual demands, for Adler, neurotic symptoms are safeguarding devices. Safeguarding devices are functions of ambition and the effort to protect the "subjective self and self-ideal from threatening outside situations." Adler says, "the patient (unknowingly) selects certain symptoms and develops them until they impress him (consciously) as real obstacles. Behind his barricade of symptoms the patient feels hidden and secure" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 265). Adler then continues:

The patient declares that he is unable to solve his task "on account of the symptoms, and only on account of these." He expects from others the solution of his problems, or the excuse from all demands, or at least, the granting of "extenuating circumstances." When he has his extenuating alibi, he feels that his prestige is protected (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 266).

Here we can see the double value of a neurotic symptom. It serves as a

safeguard when we are not aware of it; when we are aware of it the neurotic symptom serves as an excuse.

Of course, the patient suffers. The insomnia, the migraines, the neurasthenia, the compulsive symptoms are real. As Dreikurs (1967) said:

Naturally he "suffers" from his complaint; but his aches and pains are only, so to speak, the indemnity that he must pay for having alienated himself from the logic of human society. They are, as Adler says, the "war costs." They provide him with an alibi, and create the illusion that he cannot help himself—that his illness came against his will although it patently serves his purpose to guarantee himself against defeats and dangers, and paves the way for retreat. (pp. 156–157)

The neurotic symptom serves another purpose too, as Bob Powers has pointed out: it serves as a win-win insurance policy. If one fails, the symptom provides a "perfect explanation for having botched it up" and if one succeeds in overcoming one's self-imposed obstacles, "the success is a triumph—in spades!" (Powers & Griffith, 1987, pp. 124–125). One may use symptoms as an excuse to evade tasks that one fears one may fail in or one may use symptoms to appear greater than one is. In either case, third-level excuses appear to differ in this respect from second-level excuses. Second-level excuses went to the past to find means of stabilizing and/or stagnating the present. Third-level excuses, safeguarding devices, are triggered by external events in the present and are future oriented. As Adler states: "He needs them (neurotic symptoms) as an oversized safeguarding component against the dangers which, in his feelings of inferiority, he expects and incessantly seeks to avoid in working out his plans for the future" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 263). While first-level excuses followed the logic of everyday life, i.e., various forms of informal fallacies, the logic of the neurotic symptom is clear.

"If only I didn't have insomnia, I could relate to my friend." "If only I weren't depressed, I could work on my marriage." "If only I were not so overburdened, I could get my work done." All of these have the same logical structure: a hypothetical with a negative antecedent: $\sim P \supset Q$. This is why Dreikurs' question works so well. By asking the patient what could be different if he were well, one can ascertain against whom or what his symptoms are directed. What is being done here is "buying into the patient's logic." One is asserting the negative antecedent and the goal of the behavior follows by simple *modus ponens*.

Adler describes some of the character traits that are developed when one moves away from social interest and are then used as excuses:

These are: increased over-sensitivity, greater caution, rage, pedantry, defiance, thrift, dissatisfaction, and impatience . . . To be relieved of impending demands of life, to delay the solution to a life question, or to gain

extenuating circumstances then becomes the secondary ideal goal. This is demanded by the egotism of the patient and his lack of interest in others. (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967, p. 297)

The essence of all this is rebellion—the patient's rebellion against social living (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 32) and it is the therapists' task to unravel or even fight this rebellion by "spitting in the patient's soup." When one finds that the price one is paying is not cheap, but truly a high price, one may be persuaded to revise one's goals. Dreikurs' image of "spitting in the soup" is a dramatic one. Adler's description is more quiet, but equally effective: "The therapeutic method of Individual Psychology is not only a science, but an art—the art of invalidating the patient's hollow alibi and teaching him to develop and rely on his actual capacities (1979, p. 131). Adler even defines a neurosis as "a fixed alleviating alibi" (Adler, 1979, p. 241).

There is a further use for the use of excuses: differential diagnosis. As Dreikurs states: "Neurosis, psychosis, and psychopathy are differentiated not only by their symptoms but by fundamental differences in their respective mechanics" . . . The conflict between the individual's private logic (private sense) and his conscience may be resolved in three ways:

1. The patient may maintain his common sense consciously, but may look for alibis and excuses should he act contrary to common sense. Thus, he uses his symptoms as alibis and yet maintains his good conscience. This is the characteristic mechanism of neurosis.

2. The conflict may be resolved by bringing the conscience in line with the demands of private logic . . . through delusions and hallucinations . . . as a means of escape from the logic of social living, his private logic acting as a substitute. This is a characteristic mechanism of psychosis . . . usually associated with certain predisposing conditions.

3. The conflict between common sense and private sense may be avoided through the neglect of the conscience as a result of inadequate training (excessive indulgence, suppression or neglect). This is a characteristic mechanism of the psychopathic personality. (Dreikurs, 1967, pp. 104–105)

The neurotic, like the first- and second-level excuser, acknowledges and affirms the reality, indeed, even the validity of the standards he is violating (common sense). The psychopath denies the very existence of standards and the psychotic deserts them to live in a private world of his own.

Common sense consists of our consensually validated human experience based on the logic of social living. It is common sense not to drive down the wrong side of the road. And Adlerians hold that it is common sense to strive for social interest. To move away from this goal of common sense is to move vertically toward self-glorification and become mired in our own private logic.

Some ideas that are commonly held, however, may not be common sense. For example, the belief that one must eat everything on one's plate for the starving children in China is neither logical nor validated by human experience—except that of overanxious mothers. Sometimes we need to examine what we take to be “common sense.”

Of course, it is impossible for us to escape our own private logic:

Self-deception about one's intentions is part of normal human experience. Nobody knows himself, nobody can be sure of his motivations and intentions. We need subjectivity to participate in social living; we need a “biased apperception” to move forcefully in a self-chosen direction. (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 6)

And beyond that, if it is the case that we belong, that we each have a unique place in society, that we each have inherent worth, then we have an obligation and an opportunity to contribute our part to the welfare of mankind. It is our private logic that helps to make our contributions unique and valuable.

But if our private logic leads us to avoid the tasks of life, to erect a false goal of self-glorification and disguise this erroneous striving for superiority under the guise of “nobility,” we are actively hiding our true goals from ourselves. Such movement can be dangerous. It is certainly counterproductive for it renders our self-esteem fictitious and reduces and diminishes our sense of social interest. Under these conditions, we cannot truly contribute.

Summary

When there is a discrepancy between our personal goals and the logic of social living, we create excuses. The strategies involved are denial, diminishment, and temporization. The more private logic is involved, the more movement away from social interest, the deeper the excuse. First-level excuses are past, present, or future oriented and follow the logic of informal fallacies. Second-level excuses revive the past to avoid present problem solving and follow circular logic. Third-level excuses, neurotic symptoms, are future oriented and follow a hypothetical deductive pattern. Excuses may be used for differential diagnosis depending on their relation to common sense. The neurotic maintains common sense, the psychopath denies common sense, and the psychotic abandons common sense. Sometimes “common sense” itself needs to be examined. Our private logic is the basis of our uniqueness and our movement.

Reference Note

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