

Early Recollections: A Conversation

Guy J. Manaster and Mark Mays

Abstract

In a conversational format, the authors review early recollections as understood and used in Adlerian theory and practice. They emphasize views, interpretations, issues, and quandaries that they find particularly enjoyable, fulfilling, intriguing, and perplexing.

This conversation took place beside a lovely lake in northern Idaho and is, for us, an exceptional later recollection. We tried to touch on a good many issues in the use and understanding of early recollections (ERs). Moreover, we attempted to allow some of the flavor of academic wondering and intellectual wandering that characterizes Adlerians, at least we two Adlerians, to appear in the following conversation.

We have both been involved with Individual Psychology for a long time. Guy J. Manaster received a Certificate in Psychotherapy from the Adler Institute of Chicago (now the Adler School of Professional Psychology) in 1969, and he has taught Individual Psychology at The University of Texas as well as courses and workshops elsewhere since then. He has published numerous articles on early recollections, and he has been active in NASAP and IAIP. Mark Mays studied at The University of Texas in the early '70s, and he has used early recollections in his practice through the years.

Guy J. Manaster. I love early recollections. I love them because the interpretation always seems like a miracle, both to me and to the people to whom I interpret them, because they are so quick, easy, and insightful. I see use of early recollections as the ultimate projective technique. One is asked to think back over essentially everything they can remember to the earliest thing that they can remember clearly, which is then a matter of creativity and choice in development, establishment, and maintenance of lifestyle. I like the fact that almost everybody can easily and quickly summon up an early recollection and follow it up with others. When asked for early recollections, people are not generally threatened or made uncomfortable. Relating ER interpretations is usually an enjoyable process, even if the actual interpretation is weightier than clients expect.

Mark Mays. Using early recollections is a projective technique at the hub of understanding Adlerian theory. Some theories might assume that

one's earliest memories are causative of what happens to a person, that what has happened to them has shifted the focus or direction of their life one way or another, that past events or occurrences themselves have propelled a person in a certain direction. Past traumas or satisfactions are seen to have influenced a person in certain ways, and many other theories are historically based in this way. Adlerian theory, however, is much more focused on where a person's going rather than where a person's been. Adlerians see the past as a directional aid: It is the future, the goals that one is pulled toward or one is striving towards, that really make up the focus of therapy or understanding a human being. As such, the event in an early recollection is not seen as the cause of personality. Rather, who a person is causes them to select the early recollections and the meanings they associate with those early recollections.

Manaster. Understanding and interpreting ERs allows and demands using the totality of Adlerian theory, the whole holistic theory. All of Adlerian theory can be seen in early recollections and their interpretation. In a single (long) sentence, I will try to describe ERs through the essential elements of Adlerian theory, as elucidated by Heinz Ansbacher.

One looks at an entire recollection, or set of recollections, to capture an overall image (holistic) of the person's views (phenomenological) and goals (teleological) in the social world (socially oriented) to deduce the lifestyle the person developed and, then, the manner in which the person continually (self-consistency) approaches (activity) the (unique) goals created to overcome feelings of inferiority (striving for a subjectively conceived goal of success) with more or less involvement in the social world (social interest).

Mays. Early recollections can be seen to function like a person going through a cafeteria line, pulling from that line those foods that appear palatable to them or to satisfy their taste. There are items left behind on that line, that are not put on the cafeteria tray. What is chosen and what is not make up the sum and substance of a person's goals and illustrate the filtering process by which individuals understand themselves and their place in the world. Viewed that way, it's important to understand that early recollections do not reflect anything other than what a person understands about the world, themselves, and meaningful events. They're not causes of what's happened to a person or descriptions of how a person is, but they're really much more a reflection of what a person strives for at the time that the early recollection is reported.

Manaster. The cafeteria metaphor is useful in that people choose from items in a cafeteria those things that they feel are tasty or healthy, that are compatible with what they are, and that is a good way of seeing the early recollection dynamic, I think. The idea is that from all the things that are available for selection, one chooses to remember (or, in the cafeteria,

chooses to eat) those that fit their view of the world, their view of what is going to keep them healthy, alive, secure, and sustained.

Mays. In understanding early recollections, it is not merely what a person chooses to recall, but the meaning that they place on the memories. That also brings to bear the Adlerian view of what emotions are. I've likened emotions to thruster rockets that move a spaceship forward or back and away from certain obstacles. Thruster rockets can help one approach or can help one avoid certain objects in space that are seen as a resource or seen as a threat, and the emotional meaning that one places on an early recollection helps one decode the meaning of that experience. For example, say a person is playing in the park, slides down a slide, and is embarrassed by water from a rainfall at the bottom of the slide. An early recollection of that incident might recall that experience as embarrassing or humiliating. However, exactly the same experience might be recalled in a way which is much more positive, in which they laugh about something and see the surprise aspect of it as a very novel and enjoyable part of life. So one needs not only to look at the memory but also to look at what has been selected and filtered from a variety of other memories as well as the emotional meaning placed upon it, addressing the question, "How did you feel during that experience?" or "How do you feel about that recollection?" That says a great deal about the meaning of the recollection to a person and therefore a great deal about the person.

Another aspect that I enjoy about early recollections and in Adlerian theory is the analogical way of understanding how people function. If one takes the view, as do I, that we function simultaneously on multiple levels, both a literal and specific one as well as a larger and more contextual one, then one relates to the world both in terms of the specific event—the tree in the forest—as well as with an appreciation or comprehension that we live within the entire forest. If you ask a person why it is that they strive so hard to have everything be just so precise, why it is that they have to have their car perfectly organized, well, it's because they find doing so important. But if you step back and look at the larger pattern that is their personality or the forest in which these individual acts or events occur, then you see that they have an overarching goal, a superordinate goal, of wanting to be right or wanting to be better or wanting to be free from embarrassment and mistake. Those larger goals—the life striving, the lifestyle, the understanding of one's movement within context—make up the nature of understanding Adlerian therapy and theory. The early recollection fits hand in glove with that because it speaks to those analogies that convey a lot about a person in relationship. A person can be in relationship to others, to novel events, to taking initiative or risk, or to activity or passivity, and so on.

Manaster. A number of questions arise with this. We can theoretically explain early recollections, but there is the issue of what the early recollections seem to be to the client or patient or research participant. Generally, when asked to give early recollections, people think it is a kind of funny, game-like experience, and they do not expect that there is going to be anything really relevant that comes out of it, which is one reason why I get such a kick out of coming up with relevant interpretations.

Adlerians understand early recollections as the stories people know and tell themselves to confirm what they are about, what the world is about, what they have to strive for, and what they have to look out for, positively and negatively, along the way. In that regard, there is a trick that I have used in recent years to explain—generally to students—how early recollections work for the individual in the absence of therapy and therapists. I ask “Can you remember recently in some moment of trial, turbulence, conflict, that you recalled some early event, and maybe you wondered ‘Why did I think of that?’ didn’t know, and proceeded?” It’s been my experience that most everyone in the class or workshop can remember that happening. Then they can better understand why we keep these early recollections: how, when we are in a situation that is particularly unclear or confusing, an image that we remember is projected that may bring some clarity, a sense of how to feel or how to move, that we didn’t have before. We do not in the midst of that uncomfortable situation analyze the early recollections and think about it happening, but it does happen.

From Adlerian theory, one can understand that this is, at least as I see it, the early recollection in action. The prior point is that all of our early recollections, although we are not aware of them at any moment, are always with us, and these represent the underlying story that is guiding us, that is clarifying for us, that is allowing us to see the world and, in some sense, making us see the world in our own particular ways.

Mays. I can’t recall ever having had early recollections pop into my head, but I do think that whenever we encounter something new, we refer to our past experience in order to understand it. Scientific theory is filled with analogies that are really the use of old understandings applied to new situations. Freud worked around the time of the steam engine and so developed something of a hydraulic theory of emotional pressures that need to be released lest the boiler blows. Sociologists devise theories of stratification, which really is reference to an appreciation of geological stratification. When we encounter something new, we try to look back and say “My goodness, what is this like?” and we think analogically. We say “Well, this is kind of like X.” In some ways it is, and in some ways it isn’t.

When we use an analogy to communicate about a person, we can say “That guy is a fox.” We can mean several things by that. Certainly, we don’t

mean he has red, pointy ears and is covered with fur. What we mean is that person is sly or clever. So when we toss an analogy out when communicating with somebody, we leave it up to the individual to select certain points of comparison that overlap between a fox, seen as a sly and crafty, red-furred, pointy-eared animal, with this lawyer who is obviously not covered with fur, not red haired, not pointy-eared, but also sly and clever. So we find the points of comparison, and we say, "Okay. We'll say he's like that," and we do the same thing with our early recollections or with a pattern of organizing our thoughts. We resort to an understanding of the world, and we look back at points of comparison and so if we see something that's new and threatening we kind of say "What was this like? Oh, this was like other things we've encountered which were new and threatening," and we're excited by things, and so if we like excitement we're drawn to them, and if we tend to want to stay on the safe side of the street, we veer away from them.

We resort to our earlier understandings as we approach new situations, and that allows us to stay on course, even if the course is misdirected. It allows us to stay a kind of steady course just as we continue to see the world through the same templates by using the hydraulic metaphor with Freud and the geological stratification image with sociology and many others that can be thought of. We use the same kind of world understanding to encounter things that are much more complex, that might be better understood in different ways, but for which we do not have past applicable analogies. And so it is with our understandings of the world spoken to by early recollections, which point to lifestyle, which is the organizing basis of how we see the world and respond to new and past events.

Manaster. The question then is: Are early recollections the earliest recollections? Do they maintain themselves the same way over time? Why would we develop them when we're four, five, or six, which is when people usually develop their early recollections and in Adlerian terms develop their lifestyle, and maintain them, unless there is some sort of trauma, pretty much for the rest of life? From the view of this theory, early recollections are the notions that one develops at a time when one is trying to figure out what the world is about and how to live in that world. And you have to do that, you have to somehow come to a stance toward the world as you understand it. These understandings may be the first things that you recollect, are able to remember, because they are in a form that fits the understanding that you are going to maintain and do maintain. Once one has this bare-bones lifestyle, which we are saying can be understood through analyzing the early recollections, one acts on these understandings and therefore tries to maintain this view because it represents the stories of how one fits in the world, what the world is like, what one is like, and how one belongs in the world. This is useful,

possibly crucial, to the individual, even if it is not the best way to function from some objective or outside view.

I said that usually people develop these when they're four, five, or six years old. I've seen people whose earliest recollections are later. In those instances, there has been some major kind of event or change in their life circumstance, one that we might call traumatic, and they do not remember specifics prior to that event. So they develop new, early (but later) recollections because their lifestyle has changed, because the picture of the world that they had did not fit the new circumstance or did not fit after the new circumstance. That in turn, I think, gets to the question which people banter around and worry about, which is "Is the earliest recollection that one remembers truly the earliest?" and it really doesn't matter, I think. Although I also think one's earliest recollection is the earliest recollection that matters if somebody believes that this is an early recollection. If you ask for five or six early recollections and see a similar story in two or three of the six, it doesn't have to be the earliest recollection. They are early ones, and they are important and useful. There are clearly reasons people would not remember earlier than that which have to do with cognitive ability, cognitive organization, and the notion of childhood amnesia.

Mays. One of the things that has interested me is whether or not people who are paralyzed have much sense of the passage of time. My thinking is that movement seems to be a part of what our experience of time is, and the people who are paralyzed, much like those in hypnosis, have a very poor sense of time. This may be peripherally relevant to the topic of early recollections and earliest memories because movement is basically generating a series of contrasts, some difference from one's prior state, preventing habituation. When we went to school back in the early years when we had film projectors, sometimes there would be a hair or a streak or a line down one side of the movie that was being projected. After a period of time, one would erase that from memory because it was always there, it was consistent and unwavering. One thing to ponder is whether or not earliest recollections occur when a child encounters something different or unique if they've habituated to a certain pattern of interaction, a certain way of living. When they go to a new school, that is equivalent to movement for the first time to someone who is paralyzed. It's a contrast from what they have experienced in the past. It's something that removes them from the habituation that makes them unaware. The fish out of water becomes aware for the first time of being in it, and it can decide at some general level whether it likes being wet or dry.

Another thing that's of interest to me when you look at early recollections, we've used the cafeteria image of selecting some things and not selecting others, if you look at the early recollections reflecting goals, another analogy that is meaningful is that of packing for a trip. If one knows that one is going

to take a vacation in the mountains where it will be cold, one packs for that trip and goes into the closet where swimsuits and parkas both live and chooses for the trip what is appropriate for it. On the other hand, if it's summer at the beach, one would be disinclined to select the parka and would leave that behind, selecting instead shorts and a swimsuit and short sleeved shirts. When one selects early recollections, when one focuses upon certain kinds of things to pay attention to and forget, in a sense one is selecting from a vast array what is meaningful and important to remember and what can be left behind and forgotten. There is a filtering process that I think is an aspect to both Adlerian theory and early recollections.

Manaster. I think that works beautifully because it is in a sense the early recollections of the stories that you tell yourself about where you want to go and what you have to do to get there. When we talk about what kind of a world it is—let's use the climates as an example. If you feel it is a cold world, your early recollections will be of a cold world, and you will develop stories of how you have to pack, or how you have to hide, or burrow, or whatever it is you have to do to make it within that climate.

Another question may be why you have to do this, and it is the same question: Why do we have a personality, lifestyle in Adlerian terminology? I will often say to a group "Today I'm going to give you a personality lobotomy—I'm going to take away your lifestyle." What would I have taken away? How would you function? The real issue is that you would not know how to function because you would not have a sense of how the world is and how you should be in it, of what you want to get out of it. Everybody tries to be what they want to be, tries to do and get from the world what it is that they have determined before, as illustrated in early recollections. That is the basis, the reason, the need for personality.

Mays. We've talked generally about what we think early recollections are. We should now discuss or at least mention how to "prove" these notions and how we use ERs.

Manaster. The first research I did with ERs, and the first article I published in this journal in 1973, was a case study of ERs of homosexual men. In recent years, most of the research on ERs I've published has used the Manaster-Perryman Manifest Content Early Recollections Scoring Manual (Manaster & Perryman, 1974). Aside from its unfortunately long title, the manual has been useful and popular in research contexts. It has been useful in ease of scoring as a means for illustrating the general validity of ERs and showing the general nature of relationships between the ERs of people of like and unlike groups, such as counselors and clients, bulimics and anorexics, etc. However, the manual, like other nomothetic approaches to scoring ERs, is not suited to get at the essence and uniqueness of individuals' lifestyles. And this conundrum, which is at the heart of various personality assessment problems and debates, is, I think, probably not resolvable. I doubt whether the field will ever

agree that the perceived interpretive value in the individual case of the Rorschach or ERs is truly validated by nomothetic quantitative research. Nonetheless, inferences from and interpretations of the quantitative research may be the only avenue to sway strict empiricists to consider the value of these projectives.

Mays. That being the case, we are left with the overwhelming evidence of Adlerian therapists' employment of ERs in clinical and counseling settings—ERs are the most satisfactory single indicators of lifestyle. That is, if I were to have only one shot at understanding an individual's personality, lifestyle, I would choose that person's earliest recollection. That is what Alfred Adler would have wanted, also. As therapist, I believe I could extract the greatest amount of information about the client from the ER and convey the greatest amount of information back to the client from my interpretation of the ER.

Manaster. I thoroughly agree, but let me mention a last lament. Adlerian scuttlebutt for as long as I can remember casually asserts that ERs change over the course of therapy, that at the end of a successful therapy, the content of the same ERs alters to a more prosocial, more cooperative, more socially interested, and thus healthier message. I believe that, maybe because I heard it in training with Dreikurs, Mosak, Shulman, and Powers. But I have never really tested it. I have retaken ERs at the end of therapy a few times, and they seemed to have changed to a healthier meaning, but I have never systematically tested this notion on an acceptably large sample, and I don't know of anyone else having done so. Of all of the ER studies I can imagine, I think this one could produce the most meaningful and persuasive theoretical and practical findings.

Mays. There are many additional and important fine points in the literature that we could discuss but journal space will not allow that. We could delve further into the clear and direct relationship between Adlerian theory and ER interpretation, how to train people in interpreting ERs holistically, as well as the value of using the categories and items of the Manaster-Perryman Scoring Manual for that purpose, the range of subtle meanings that can be extracted from the use of the categories and items, using ERs to stay on track during the course of therapy, and on and on. But we can't do that all here, so let's go swimming.

Reference

Manaster, G. J., & Perryman, T. B. (1974). Early recollections and occupational choice. *Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research and Practice*, 30, 232–237.

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