

## USING IMAGINARY TEAM MEMBERS IN REFLECTING “AS IF”

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*An integration of Adlerian and Constructivist ideas, this procedure uses imaginary team members to help clients in the reflecting “as if” process; a process whereby clients take a reflective step out of or away from their problems in order to create space to reflect upon perceptual and behavioral alternatives.*

Adlerian and constructivist therapies have many similarities. In brief, they share common theoretical ground regarding both epistemology and the socially embedded nature of human knowledge (Neimeyer, 1995; Watts, 1999, 2000, 2003b). In addition, they share the following clinical practice characteristics: both strongly emphasize the importance of the therapeutic relationship; both focus on clients’ strengths, resources, and abilities; and both are optimistic and future-oriented (Andersen, 1991; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Hoyt, 1994; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000; O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Raskin & Bridges, 2002;

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Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996; Schneider & Stone, 1999; Walter & Peller, 1992; Watts, 1999, 2000, 2003b; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000; Watts & Shulman, 2003; West, Watts, Trepal, Wester, & Lewis, 2001; White & Epston, 1990).

*Using Imaginary Team Members in Reflecting "As If"* is a procedure that integrates ideas from Adlerian and constructive approaches. The *reflecting "as if"* process (Watts, 2003a), extends the traditional Adlerian technique of *Acting As If* by integrating reflexive questions from constructive therapies. The Adlerian technique asks clients to begin acting as if they were already the person they would like to be; for example, "a confident person." The process asks clients to pretend, and emphasizes that they are only acting. The purpose of the technique is to "bypass potential resistance by neutralizing some of the perceived risk" (p. 73).

According to Watts (2003a), the *reflecting "as if"* procedure

asks clients to take a "reflective" step back prior to stepping forward to act "as if." This process encourages clients to reflect on how they would be different if they were acting "as if" they were the person they desire to be. By using reflective questions, counselors can help clients construct perceptual alternatives and consider alternative behaviors toward which they may begin moving. (p. 73)

When immersed in difficult situations, however, some clients have difficulty with the aforementioned reflecting process. They struggle to see beyond the "problem" and are unable to create perceptual alternatives and alternative behaviors. These clients need help stepping out of or stepping away from problems so that they may create a place for reflection, and consequently, develop preferred alternative meanings (Watts, 2002; West et al., 2001). The use of imaginary reflecting teams can be one way to help clients step out of or away from problems and create dialogic space for reflecting as if.

Andersen (1991) suggests using reflecting teams to help clients become more reflective in their thinking. In Anderson's original format, reflecting teams discuss their perspectives in the presence of clients, rather than remaining hidden behind a one-way mirror. Clients then discuss their reflections of the reflecting team's conversation. Freedman and Combs (1996) note that reflecting teams may be composed of persons not actually present in therapy sessions. That is, clients are asked to mentally invite in one or more persons they respect and trust to serve as team members for creating reflective thinking. These team members may be invited to current and future sessions to help clients create alternative meanings or behaviors.

## THE PROCESS OF USING IMAGINARY TEAMS IN *REFLECTING “AS IF”*

The reflecting “as if” process has three phases and imaginary team members may be used in all three phases. The first phase taps the creativity and imagination of clients by using reflective questioning. The second phase creates a structured plan of action based on the client’s reflective thinking. In the last phase, the client implements the “as if” behaviors, and subsequently discusses the experience in session with the counselor.

### **Phase One: *Reflecting “As If”***

The counselor uses reflective questions similar to the following:

- “If you were acting ‘as if’ you were the person you would like to be, what would you be doing differently?”
- If I (the therapist) were to see you six months from now and you had made significant progress, what would I notice that was different?
- What will be some initial indicators that you are headed in the right direction? (See also West et al., 2001)

### *Creating the Imaginary Team*

As noted earlier, sometimes clients have difficulty responding to these more direct reflective questions. When a therapist is aware of this difficulty, he or she can invite imaginary team members into the session.

To begin using imaginary team members in session, the therapist asks the client the following: “Think of one or more persons you respect and view as wise.” The client and therapist then create a list of team members. To amplify the team member imagery, the therapist may provide chairs for each team member, similar to the use of an empty chair in Gestalt therapy. Therapists may choose to put nametags on the chairs for identification purposes (Watts, 2002).

Once the team is created, the counselor may call on team members for assistance by asking clients questions from narrative and solution-focused therapies such as:

- Suppose you are talking to this person/couple in the future after you’ve made significant progress in overcoming the problem. What changes will he [she, or they] say are evident?

- What, specifically, will he [she, or they] say is different about you?
- What specific steps would he [she, or they] identify that you took to make this significant change? [Future Questions]
- What suggestions might he [she, or they] make for responding constructively to the problem? [Suggestion Question]
- What might he [she, or they] say you do when anger attacks you? [Externalizing Question]
- How would he [she or they] describe times when the problem isn't a problem for you? [Exception Question]
- How would he [she, or they] describe what you do when you are acting in ways that you prefer? [Unique Outcome Question]

Follow up questions for exception and unique outcome questions might be:

- How would he [she, or they] explain your ability to accomplish this great success? [Accomplishment/Coping Question]
- How will he [she, or they] know when you two are starting to move in the direction you both want to go as a couple? [Initial Movement Question]. (West et al., 2001)

### **Phase Two: Planning “As If”**

After the client has directly reflected or “heard” reflections from team members, the therapist and client coconstruct a list of “as if” behaviors indicative of preferred outcomes. After constructing the list, each partner is to rank the “as if” behaviors in terms of difficulty (from “least” to “most”). Again, if clients are having difficulty ranking the behaviors, the therapist may invite imaginary team members to help the client with the ranking process. After the behaviors have been ranked, the acting “as if” may begin.

### **Phase Three: Enacting “As If”**

Prior to the next session, the client focuses on one or two of the “least” difficult behaviors. Beginning with the least difficult behaviors increases the likelihood of success, and success tends to increase the client's sense of personal agency. With some success, the client is more likely to engage the more difficult tasks on his, her, or their list with courage and motivation.

In the next (and subsequent sessions), the client and therapist discuss the enactment of the “as if” behaviors selected for that week and any resulting perceptual alternatives or enactment difficulties. Engaging in new behaviors often helps create dialogic space whereby the client is able to perceive self and others differently. Imaginary team members may be invited in to discuss areas of improvement or areas for growth. The types of questions offered as examples in Phase One are easily adapted for use in this phase of the process.

As the client attempts the more difficult tasks, it will be important for the therapist to help the client frame success in terms of potentially smaller increments of forward movement. The client may be more patient and find the process less frustrating if the therapist helps him or her to focus on efforts and incremental growth rather than ultimate outcomes (Watts, 2002, 2003b; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). Again, imaginary team members can be invited to positively reflect on the efforts and forward movement, and provide encouragement when progress moves slower.

## CONCLUSION

The process of *Using Imaginary Team Members in Reflecting “As If”* is an integration of Adlerian and constructivist perspectives. When clients and therapists have difficulty directly accessing responses to reflective “as if” questions, using imaginary team members in the “as if” process may help tap clients’ self-helping creativity and imagination.

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