

## FRAMING A COUPLE'S "NEW CONTRACT" THROUGH EARLY RECOLLECTIONS

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Adler described the basic Life Tasks that everyone faces: friendship, work and intimacy. Most couples would agree that intimacy is the hardest since it requires the co-operation of two people with different perceptions of self, others and life. It is the meeting of two different sets of Private Logic. We can see how difficult it is because most people manage to make friends and find work, but the divorce rate is very high and those who stay together do not always describe the relationship as happy or fulfilling.

"Love is a task for two individuals. For many people this is bound to be a new task. To some degree we have been trained to work alone; to some degree, to work in a group. We have generally had little experience of working two by two" (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher 1978, p. 124).

Dreikurs said it is often easier to end the relationship rather than doing the hard work of exploring solutions to the current issues. One of the primary roles of an Adlerian couple therapist is to explore with clients alternative methods to allow change in, and growth of, each individual and the relationship. When two people decide to become a couple, they formulate a contract between them in a verbal, or a non-verbal, way. According to Adler, love and marriage can be successful only when each partner is "more interested in the other than in him-[her]self" (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 432).

The basic contract is an agreement of co-operation when the decision is for eternity.

"And we regard only those unions as real examples of love and as real marriages in which a fixed and unalterable decision has been taken" (ibid., p. 432).

This is the ideal contract between two adults who form a long-term couple relationship. Its success depends on the partners' ability to actualise interest and understanding of the other.

"The worst preparation is when an individual is always looking for his[her] own interest ... He[She] will always be demanding freedom and reliefs, never considering how he[shel] can ease and enrich the life of his[her] partner" (ibid., p. 435).

In this article, we shall refer to "Partner's Interest" (p.1.), which means that each one has the capacity to understand thoroughly his or her partner's needs and feelings, and to be invested in his or her well-being. The relationship works when each partner is less preoccupied with feelings of frustration because of unfulfilled fantasies.

Most people who fall in love are trying to achieve this goal, and the aim is often to invest in the partner's happiness. However, very often these efforts fail. When each one does not fully understand the other's way of thinking and operates as if the partner has similar goals, a vicious cycle begins. When the receiving partner feels misunderstood, the giving partner feels offended and unappreciated. When this "game" continues, the individuals in the relationship feel betrayed and miserable. If they want to save the marriage, they will seek help through therapy.

In one of the co-writer's book (Betner & Lew, 1990), the needs to fulfill are called the Crucial Cs and are described as follows:

- To feel we Connect: Adler's sense of belonging. ("He hugs me often and holds my hand when we walk".)
- To feel Capable: Adler's striving to move from a felt minus to a perceived plus. ("She had a father who could fix everything and I can, too, and she appreciates that ability.")
- To feel we Count: Adler's goal of finding significance. ("She handles the family finances and he often says: 'What would I do without you'.")
- To feel Courage: Adler's emphasis on the need to be encouraged. ("He often says or does things that make me feel better about myself.")

According to Adler, life is movement, and in a couple, it means growth and development of each individual and of the relationship between them.

The way to describe the current world is to understand that the only constant in this movement is change. Another way to say it is: The only thing that does not change is that everything changes. Therefore, the basic honest, pure, significant initial contract will change and the couple's therapist has to become aware of the new and changing contract.

"Some people marry for economic security; they marry because they pity someone; or they marry to secure a servant. ... It is also a great mistake if a marriage is

contracted out of fear and not out of courage. ... It is a sign that they do not wish for real co-operation" (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 437).

Here we present a model of using Early Recollections (ERs) to unveil the altered contract. Most couples are not aware of the fact that growing and changing require modifications in their initial contract. When these are not carried out, the outcome is conflict and a high rate of divorce.

Most therapists will attest to the fact that working with couples is difficult since we have to understand both partners and discover what keeps them from getting what they need. However, working with both partners gives the therapist an advantage because analysing the early memories of both can show to each other how they fit together in getting what they expected to find and to show them the changes in their needs.

When working with couples using ERs, the therapist and the partners are provided with an excellent and quick understanding of the dynamics in the relationship. In each ER, the therapist can easily identify the goals and strategies of each partner in order to achieve a sense of belonging in the relationship. A new comprehension and awareness develops gradually and, as a result, the couple's "new contract" is disclosed. This enables the couple to relate differently to each other. In identifying the variables in the ERs, the level of Partner's-Interest (P.I.) will be explicitly uncovered together with the individual "contract" that each partner is hoping to actualise in the relationship.

An advantage in seeing both partners also allows the therapist not only to reveal the couple's strengths and show them how they can use them to repair the relationship, but also to acknowledge once again each partner's strengths that existed

prior to committing to a long-term relationship. When people are discouraged, they tend to use their strengths incorrectly.

### The Use of Early Recollections (ERs) in Couple Therapy

The use of early recollections (ERs) in Psychotherapy is one of Adler's amazing and most effective ways of working with individuals, couples and families.

In the analysis of ERs, the basic concepts of Adler's theory of *Individual Psychology* are applied:

- *Hollism*: An ER is a creative metaphor that accurately illustrates the client's emotional and cognitive state at the time of recalling it. Both partners describe in their own creative way how they think and feel at that particular moment about self and each other.
- *Movement*: ERs are constantly changing according to an individual's frame of mind and feelings.
- *Belonging*: An individual is constantly moving to achieve the most important existential goal, i.e., a feeling of belonging to family, work and society. Each detail in the ER depicts the individual's movement to achieve this sense of belonging to his or her partner. The couples' ERs describe metaphorically the partners' need to belong to the relationship.
- *Creativity*: Adler stated that every person is born with remarkable creative power. In each ER, we can identify a person's choices in order to belong to the couple relationship.

### Strategies

Individuals use their creativity to invent strategies in order to feel significant, to contribute and to belong to the family. These strategies develop into a "contract" that fulfills the three major Life Tasks:

- Social (family, friends, others);
- Work;
- Intimate Relationship and Family.

In therapy, we use ERs to identify the individual's strategies and each partner's "contract" to ensure feelings of significance and value (Shifron & Bettner, 2003). Working with couples, we often find that the misunderstanding of each partner's "contract" leads to feelings of rejection and pain. ERs disclose each individual "contract" and only then can a mutual clear new "contract" emerge.

### Process Towards New Strategies

- *Choice*: The individual chooses the path towards achieving the goal of belonging in the relationship throughout life.
- *Change*: The individuals who are exposed to an encouraging environment will be able to adopt new ideas and be open to new directions. In each ER, there is rich information that the therapist can point out to each partner on how to use new strategies.
- *Reconstruction*: During the therapy process, clients are invited by the therapist to find and create changes within the ERs.

In couple therapy, this last step is crucial in order to develop a new healthy and effective "contract", a contract where strategies for belonging facilitate change from S.I. (Self-Interest) to P.I. (Partner's Interest).

As Eva Dreikurs Ferguson (2015) wrote:

"For Adlerians, social relationships that involve reciprocity, collaboration and mutual support are more likely to occur when humans in their beliefs and actions relate to each other as equals" (p. 18).

One research project indicated that the positive quality of a couple's friendship accounts for 70% of overall couple satisfaction and that the reverse is detrimental to health. A healthy friendship is one where both partners find their commonalities and respect their differences, and gradually develop an honest degree of Partner's Interest (P.I.).

The following are several ERs of a couple in therapy: Uri and Dina. We shall delineate their current contract from their ERs and we shall emphasise the desired changes in order to improve their relationship.

**URI**

**Siblings:** an older sister stillborn and two brothers, 5 and 8 years older respectively.

**Mother:** "Ordered us around. She had us paint all the rooms over and over."

**Uri says:** "*I told Dina that everything does not have to be fixed.*"

**ER, Age 5:**

"I am in the back seat of a car going to a deli with Mum. She's speeding down the street. I'm looking out thinking everything's okay."

**Feeling:** "Happy because I'm with her."

**Uri says:** "*I expect to be protected by Dina. When I experience her protection, I am happy. In addition, when I provide Dina with safety and protection, I expect her to be happy.*"

**ER, Age 5:** "Mum and I are at the poultry store with live chickens.

Mum goes in and talks to the guy. She picks a chicken. The guy then kills the chicken and uses a machine that rips the feathers off and drains the blood. We took the chicken home."

**Feeling:** "Belonging, safe, with Mum."

**Uri says:** "*I am ready to go through weird experiences as long as I feel safe with Dina. In addition, I expect Dina to accept me as I am as long as I provide her with safety and protection.*"

**ER, Age 6-8:** "Mum is in bed, sick. I went into her bedroom."

**Feeling:** "Sad because I am alone."

**Uri says:** "*I feel sad and lonely when Dina is not well.*"

**ER, Age 12:** "Mum is in hospital. I am sitting on the bench in the hallway."

**Uri says:** "*I am extremely concerned when Dina is not well.*"

**ER, Age 11-12:** "We sitting on my bed. Mum came home. I had a friend over and my bed was ruffled. She asked me what I was doing on the bed. I said: 'We were playing.'"

Feeling: "Rejection because I think she doesn't trust me."

Uri says: "*Trust is an important issue for me. I feel rejected when Dina does not trust me.*"

ER, Age 7: "Standing on a chair, helping Mum make an Italian dessert."

Feeling: "Good because I was with her."

Uri says: "*I like to collaborate, to do things together with Dina and I hope she likes it too.*"

ER, age 7: "Playing with matches, sitting under a table. The table cover caught on fire. I ran. Someone got a hose and put it out. I am in my room. What did I do?"

Feeling: "Scared because I'll be in trouble."

Uri says: "*I know when I am wrong and I know when I deserved to be punished.*"

ER, Age 4-5: "Me and Mum walking to grammar school down the street. All of a sudden, a big rainstorm breaks out. It was like a tornado (scared.) Mum decided to try a door and all we see is two big eyes: a dog is inside the school. We're scared and she shuts the door (scared). I didn't know what would happen. She says: 'Let's stand here under the portico until the storm passes.' We did it and then we went home."

Feeling: "Secure because I am safe and with someone who is taking care of me."

Uri says: "*I know that I give Dina the impression that she needs to take care of me.*"

Uri likes Dina to take care of him as a wife; however, he gets angry when she tries to handle everything for the kids and tells them what to do. She calls it guidance and says that giving advice is a mother's job. He calls it controlling and relentless.

## DINA

Father married three times, had a daughter and son by other marriages. Mum and Dad had Dina, another daughter one year older and two sons, 8 and 10 years older respectively. Her parents divorced. She used to be bulimic and was very sexually active in college (wild sex).

ER, age 10: "Dad pounding his fist on the table and saying: 'Here's the money. Is this what you want? Take it!' Mother picks up the money and he leaves the table."

Feeling: "Disconnected and discomfort, walking on eggs, and I had to be perfect."

Dina says: "*Money is an issue for me. I feel as if I 'walk on eggs' when I have to ask Uri for money.*"

ER, age 8: "Our family and another family went to the beach. We were in a station wagon and on the way to Jones Beach. We kids were playing a game, pretending to shoot the tyres of other cars with our fingers. One of the cars pulled over with a flat tyre." Feeling: "Joy at being together, feeling fulfilled by our success with a car, which was one of those we had 'shot at'."

Dina says: "*I feel that we are together when we have mutual goals and we succeed in accomplishing them.*"

**ER, age 6:** "I was with my Dad and my best friend, Dana. We had a little tea set. We called Dad 'Heathcliff'. He was funny, had his pinkie finger out, drinking the tea. We had a nice time together; I wish we had more of those."

Feeling: "Joy with being in the moment, a moment of bliss."

Dina says: "*When I initiate projects and Uri joins me happily, I feel joy and bliss.*"

**ER, age 16:** "We were in high school and my brother and I had a party at our house and invited the junior and senior classes over. We didn't tell Dad. He came home and was shocked, disgusted, that we hadn't told him about the party. I was scared that he would blow up at Mum in front of the other kids and embarrass me. My friend, Dana, went to say hello to Dad and told him it would be fine."

Feeling: "Relief because it was all okay. My friend had helped me out."

Dina says: "*I know when I am not right and I expect to be punished.*" (Uri says the same thing).

**ER, age 5:** "We were at the Lake in my father's friend's house. His friend had shot a deer and he was skinning it."

Feeling: "Amazed that people did that, shooting animals, and disgusted that the deer was being skinned."

Dina says: "*I have my own values and I have a hard time understanding that not everyone shares my values and therefore often I do not understand Uri.*"

**ER, age 8-9:** "My older brothers had made a fair with rides, a small mono-trail, a Ferris Wheel and a three-story fort in the back yard. They had food. Mum was in agreement with it. The neighbours came. Dad helped with the fair. Everyone enjoyed it."

Feeling: "Content, great day, friends, all of us together, all around. I like that, a team."

Dina says: "*When we do things together I am happy.*" (Uri says in his ERs the same things).

#### **Current Contract**

**Him:** "I want to feel we are a couple and do simple things together. I don't care what we do."

**Her:** "I want to be together but only if things are on my terms. If you disagree don't show it to me."

#### **Summary**

One of Adler's greatest gifts to psychotherapy was the use of Early Recollections. They are the equivalent of a doctor's X-Ray that allows us to see each person's strengths and give a picture of the couple's current situation. ERs explain the Life Style of each partner, the current contract and the discouragement resulting from it. This information can be very beneficial to married couples as well as couples contemplating marriage or long-term relationships. With this knowledge, couples could prevent some small problems before they become serious.

Dina and Uri show through their memories that they love each other and want to find ways of being close and encouraging to each other.

They want to stay together and will use the information gathered from their current contract to make healthy changes in their relationships.

"There is an old German method for finding out whether a couple is prepared for marriage. It is the custom in rural districts to give the couple a double-handled saw, each person to hold one end, and then have them saw the trunk of a tree ... Each one has to be interested in what the other is doing and harmonise his[her] strokes with the other. This method is thus considered a good test of fitness for marriage" (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 438).

This custom is a metaphor illustrating and teaching a couple that:

1. They need to face all matters of life together co-operatively;
2. They must carry out difficult tasks; and
3. Work becomes pleasure when it is done together.

Dreikurs (1946), in his book "*The Challenge of Marriage*", wrote:

"A little smile, a kind expression of patience, a kiss full of tenderness and a world of sincere affection may work wonders" (p. 140).

Perhaps we should establish many Couple Education Centres so that couples could learn the necessary skills to obtain what they need from a partner and have a place to go to when the difficulties are small, so that they can understand that each one of them will grow and change, and so will the relationship.

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## USING LIFE STYLE INFORMATION TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES

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*"Unhappiness in marriage is merely a mistake, a defect in one's life pattern."* Alfred Adler, *Reading Times* (29/11/1929, p. 24).

This simple quote contains much about what Alfred Adler believed about people and their relationships. People either learn, or do not learn, how to get along in a satisfying way with one another. When unhappiness or deviance occurs, the individual or the couple needs to take responsibility and learn a different way of relating in order to get along in a more satisfying manner.

From the cultural context of the United States, this article addresses, through a clinical example, a specific sub-cultural group. Yet, we contend there is potential transferability of the skills and principles expressed so as to assist therapeutically multiple and diverse cultural groups in therapeutic settings within the US as well as beyond, where black people have generally different social histories stemming from colonialism.

This article presents Adlerian couple therapy applied to the case of two newly married African-American individuals. It describes the unique features of the African-American couple, the key concepts of the Adlerian approach, the Life Style Assessment data from both of them, as well as their responses to a series of questions to address their unique cultural issues, and a detailed treatment formulation and treatment plan.

## The Unique Features of the African-American Couple

Due to differences in culture and context, there must be room to incorporate these distinctions when working with African-American couples from an Adlerian perspective, which can be especially rewarding for them. The holistic nature of Adlerian theory calls for therapists to pay attention to their clients' world and their social context. This is important as many African-Americans have a more collectivistic culture, especially in comparison to their White counterparts. Extended family members and close family friends are integral parts of the family unit. As such, when doing couple therapy with African-American couples, the therapist is also informally working with their families.

As cited in Carlson & Englar-Carlson (2016):

"The Adlerian concepts of an interest in helping others, contributing to the social community, and social belonging support the cultural value system of many African American families (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Parham, 2002; Perkins-Dock, 2005). The African-centred worldview is based in the notion that all things are connected, which helps account for the connection between African American people and the socio-cultural contexts in which they live (Parham, 2002). This sense of connection and commonality is consistent with the Adlerian construct of social interest (Perkins-Dock, 2005)" (p. 46).

Furthermore, in American society more broadly, African-Americans face issues such as systemic racism, higher incarceration rates (particularly for men), treatment as "lesser than", and the strain of having to live in multiple racial worlds

(Helm & Carlson, 2013). This context also needs to be understood if an African-American couple is to receive a holistic treatment.

Given the stressors that African-Americans face, it can be difficult for some to acknowledge strengths and personal positive qualities, as well as those traits associated with being African-American. A theory that is strength-based and aims at encouraging and socially motivating clients can allow African-American couples that face oppression and racial stereotypes to focus on themselves in a more positive way – something that may be denied by the larger society. This can be accomplished in many ways, but one important approach is to establish the couple and the therapist as equals, all of whom have input that is valued. This can be important to an African-American couple that may not receive the same treatment in life outside the therapy room. Adlerian theory also gives room for the therapist to connect with the couple by opening a space to discuss his or her own culture. Sharing some personal history, including experiences of privilege, can demonstrate that the space is safe to discuss issues of culture.

### **Adlerian Couple Counselling**

Alfred Adler was the first therapist of the modern era to do family therapy. He is also believed to have been the first to provide help to couples (Bitter, 2009). His “systemic” approach stressed the importance of relationships and the social context:

Adler believed in marriage and was able to help others to translate his ideas into creating happy satisfying relationships. We use the word *satisfying* and not *love*. The goal in couple counselling is to increase satisfaction. Love is present in most

relationships. Even when people divorce, they often love their partner, but they just are not satisfied in their marriage. Frequently this is because the couple does not have the necessary skills and needs a tailored treatment.

The Adlerian approach involves helping couples to create or restore both social and emotional equality. Adler noted that a quality marriage is one in which each person is more concerned about the well-being of the other than they are about themselves. In essence: “Love is the wish to make another happy” (Carlson, Peluso, Figenbaum & Oles, 2012, p. 244). It is this attitude that helps couples to feel and act like a unit and to place value on the relationship, while still respecting the individuality of each partner.

In couple work, it is important to realise, as well as clarify to the couple, that there are three entities in a marriage or partnership. Couples need to understand that in their marriages, there is “me”, “you”, and “us”. The Adlerian therapist is concerned with what is best for “us”, or the relationship, and does not get caught up in arbitrating individual partner’s needs.

The Adlerian therapist realises the importance of education or psycho-education in working with couples (Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2005). Couples learn about marriage from their families of origin and typically replicate what they have been taught and modelled. Many partners say that they will not be like their father or mother but despite their best intentions what else do they know? The Adlerian therapist attempts to remove blaming and to normalise relationship problems by helping the couple realise that their behaviours towards one another are not as much intentional as they are learned.

The task of therapy is to unlearn those behaviours that create distance between one another, and to establish those that create connection and togetherness.

Some of the most prominent Adlerians who influenced Adlerian couple counselling include Rudolf Dreikurs, Jon Carlson and Don Dinkmeyer. In 1946, Rudolf Dreikurs wrote *The Challenge of Marriage* to provide guidance to couples to help them learn how to have a more satisfying marriage. In 1984, Don Dinkmeyer and Jon Carlson developed a comprehensive marriage-enrichment training programme, *Training in Marriage Enrichment (TIME)*, for couples to learn the skills needed to create satisfying marriages. The couples' guide *Time for a Better Marriage* (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003) also provides important information, homework and experiential activities that educate couples towards healthier and fulfilling ways of co-operating and connecting in their relationships.

The ten-week *TIME* programme was shown to be effective (Bowling, Hill & Jencius, 2005; Hawley & Olson, 1995; Matteson, Christensen & England, 1988). Some of Adler's key concepts, which are incorporated in *The Challenge of Marriage* and the *TIME* programme, are important when working with couples. These are described below.

### **Theory of Problem Formulation**

As alluded to earlier in this article, couples that struggle lack the knowledge and skills on how to co-operate and to treat each other with equality and respect. Adlerian theory is a value-laden theory that argues for healthy functioning and for the need to act in a socially interested or courageous, compassionate, creative and common sense way (Manaster &

Corsini, 1982). Therefore, problems arise in people and couples when they try to cope with feelings of discouragement and inferiority in an unhealthy, unproductive, rigid, or unhelpful way.

All people have feelings of inferiority, but healthy individuals strive to do better, to be better people and improve themselves, and these feelings can help motivate them as well as address the need of belonging and being connected with others. When people have been trained from childhood to cope with these feelings of inferiority effectively or learned this later, then stressors are easier to manage; but if people lack this knowledge and training, then problems emerge. Individuals' feelings of inferiority also increase when they are in situations where it feels that others are not including them. This is why it is important for the Adlerian therapist to understand how each person's current perceptions of him- or herself, others and the world influences his or her feelings.

### **Theory of Problem Resolution**

Adlerian couple therapists use the principles that Carlson and Dinkmeyer (2003) have indicated are the foundation of the process of change:

1. *Developing and maintaining a good relationship require a time commitment.*  
For the relationship to succeed, the couple must make it a priority now and in the future.

2. *Specific skills that are essential to a healthy partnership can be learned.*

When the couple understands how a marriage works and learn about the necessary skills required for building a satisfying marriage, they can develop the techniques that create a positive and rewarding relationship.

3. *Change often takes time and all change begins with you.*

The first step in creating a satisfying marriage involves a commitment to change. Each partner begins by understanding what his or her role in the marriage has been and what he or she can do to make the relationship different. Both must be patient in their growth and allow for different paces of change. As you proceed through the therapy process, some weeks will produce wonders and others will produce little apparent change.

4. *Feelings of love and caring that have diminished or disappeared often return when behaviour changes.*

Some days we are close to one another while others we are distant. Romantic feelings, intimacy and love often diminish over time in a relationship. When feelings change, many couples believe the relationship is over. This need not be the case. A change of feelings may mean that the partners are not reinforcing their relationship, which deserves a higher priority. It is important at such times to act as if all were well. By acting as if the relationship is the intimate, satisfying relationship desired, new behaviours and feelings can be established.

5. *Small changes are very important in bringing about big change.*

A happier relationship results from many small changes over a period of time. Even though both partners are committed to change, there may be times when unwanted patterns reappear. This does not mean that the new skills they are learning are not working in their marriage. If they continue focussing on the positive relationship they desire, these times of testing will pass. Lasting and satisfying marriages are created when both partners love and support each other. The question becomes, how can they learn to love and support each other more often? Like muscles, this becomes stronger with exercise. There are many factors that can interfere with a relationship and as many skills that can help sustain an on-going atmosphere of love and support.

The skills necessary for an effective marriage are learned. Partners begin marriage with an assortment of behaviours, some of which are effective and others ineffective in helping them achieve the desired sense of connection. The skills needed to enrich an intimate relationship are well known to Adlerian couple therapists and can be expressed to their clients in simple terms. Adlerian therapists are attempting to help the marriage partners learn to relate in the following positive ways (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003):

- They individually accept responsibility for their behaviour and their self-esteem;
- They identify and align their personal and marital goals;
- They choose to encourage each other;
- They communicate their feelings with honesty and openness;

- They listen empathically when feelings are being expressed;
- They seek to understand the factors that influence their relationship;
- They demonstrate that they accept and value each other;
- They make choices that are best for the relationship;
- They choose thoughts, words and actions that support the positive goals of their marriage;
- They solve marital conflicts as they arise;
- They commit themselves to the on-going process of maintaining a satisfying marriage.

#### **Adlerian Couple Therapy**

As in Individual Psychotherapy, there are four stages in Adlerian couple therapy. These are "Relationship", "Assessment", "Insight" and "Re-orientation" (Carlson & Englar-Carlson, 2016; Carlson, Watts & Maniaci, 2005). Therapy proceeds along a series of progressive stages that seem quite logical. In practice, these are not necessarily followed in a fixed sequential fashion but actually are fluid, stop and start many times as therapy progresses (Carlson & Englar-Carlson, 2016).

An Adlerian couple therapist is very active within the counselling and process of change. So, it is very important that the partners feel that they have a strong and equal relationship with the therapist for change to occur. It is also important that the therapist does not favour one member of the couple over the other. Connection with both partners happens not only during the relationship phase, but also throughout the other stages. The therapist can go about doing this in several ways, but one approach is by making sure each member of the couple is

treated with respect. There is the added bonus that the partners can learn from how they might treat one another.

The therapist also offers encouragement and hope to them. When many couples enter therapy, they are discouraged and cannot see a light at the end of the tunnel. Offering encouragement and hope, and also underlining strengths, can help the therapist to facilitate a stronger relationship with the couple. This stage is important as there needs to be a solid base on which the rest of the sessions will be built.

The second stage involves a formal assessment and is important in allowing the therapist to collect information that will be used to further the therapy. During this phase, data about the couple system and how each person works within that structure are collected. Collecting this information allows the therapist, and the couple, to understand the system better. When this occurs, each partner can become more aware of which problems he or she is contributing to and change his or her behaviour accordingly (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 1999). The Life Style Assessment is a good way of collecting information as it allows the therapist to get an understanding of each partner's Private Logic and goals in life, and how messages from childhood have impacted on the current relationship.

It is important to assess the individuals' respective Life Styles. For the Adlerian couple therapist, it is desirable, whenever possible, to undertake these before working with the couple. However, to do a complete Life Style Assessment can take several sessions due to the length of this comprehensive exercise. This problem can be compounded in couple counselling due to the need of completing it for the two partners. However, a mini Life Style Assessment can be effected, which still allows

for the collection of pertinent data such as family atmosphere, relationships among family members and siblings, early recollections, while not taking as much time as a full Life Style Assessment (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 1999).

Understanding the underlying personality or Life Style factors of a couple is necessary as it gives the therapist insight into how the partners are able to co-operate. Leggett, Roberts-Pittman, Byczek and Mores (2012) examined 977 couples and found that co-operation was related to marital satisfaction more than communication skills. The Adlerian therapist takes the time to explain each person's Life Style and the conceptualisation of the partnership before any skills are taught. This is done in order to prevent personality dynamics from sabotaging the building of effective skills for interventions.

The third stage of Adlerian Therapy is the insight phase during which the therapist begins to introduce some interventions. The couple also makes adjustments in the way each partner relates and reacts to the other. This is the beginning of the process of change as the couple begins to discover the types of behaviour that are causing problems in the relationship (Peluso & MacIntosh, 2007). The therapist facilitates this change and helps bring to attention the underlying reasons that have caused difficulty in the relationship. A fair amount of time could be spent in this phase while the couple is gaining insight into the difficulties they have had and then take responsibility for them, and initiate the process of change.

In the final stage of the therapy, re-orientation, a more concrete action plan and a problem list is drawn up. The action plan is set up using the presenting problem of the couple and the Life Style Assessment done previously. The therapist formulates this plan

in consultation with the couple, while the latter acts it out with his or her help. While specific shifts are being made, it is important that the couple and the therapist monitor together how these changes are working and whether or not they are bringing the partners closer to their relationship goals (Peluso & MacIntosh, 2007). The partners will be in charge of carrying out the interventions recommended by the therapist. Eliciting a promise that the couple will persist with an intervention for a certain amount of time increases the chances of compliance and success.

In this article, we are focussing on the assessment stage of the couple therapy process and how the information collected is effectively used when working with African-American couples. To show how this process works, we have assembled Life Style data from an actual couple, Michelle and Shawn (not their real names). The goal of this article is to demonstrate how this can provide the information necessary to create an effective treatment conceptualisation and a tailored treatment plan.

### **Introducing the Couple<sup>(\*)</sup>**

Michelle and Shawn both agreed to share their relationship as a way to teach others how to work with African-American couples. They have given the authors permission to collect information on their marriage, interpret it and publish the results. As Shawn and Michelle shared themselves, it was important that they also benefit from this process. In that regard, the authors discussed the results of the Life Style inventory with both of them.

<sup>(\*)</sup> In the case example, the co-author Ebony Spriggs, who is African-American, did the consultation, which minimised the possibility of variance from cultural empathy.

During this process, feedback on the interpretation was encouraged from the couple. Their comments were then incorporated into the Life Style conceptualisation in order for both Michelle and Shawn to feel and verify that it represented them.

Michelle (age 25) and Shawn (age 30) is a recently married African-American couple who have a nine-month old daughter. They have been married for a little under a year but had previously dated for several years. They are seeking couple counselling as they are having difficulty finding solutions to the conflicts that they are experiencing in their relationship, especially when it comes to their parenting styles.

As Michelle stated: *"Shawn tends to be more stern and I'm more open to spoiling and picking her up whenever she cries."* This has been an issue for both of them, as they would like to have a consistent parenting style. While they are aware of this current problem, both also feel that there are strengths within the relationship that should not be changed. They recognise that they have many similar values such as a strong belief in their religion, putting family first, having fun together, working hard, being able to solve problems and understanding the other's perspective.

For both Michelle and Shawn, it is important to have a family unit that is cohesive; for them, their ideal couplehood includes being good parents. Especially for Shawn, it is important that they raise their daughter as someone who is proud to be African-American.

### Life Style Summaries

Shawn was raised in a Black community that valued family, Black love and education, and did not experience how the world could be unfair to Black people until he moved away for college. As the first-born male in a sib-ship of two boys, he modelled himself on how to be a man from his grandfather, i.e., someone who liked the outdoors, was a handyman and good with numbers. He made his place by being the most athletic and intelligent, getting the best grades, being considerate and yet was selfish at times compared to his brother. His brother Jason worked harder but was more of a Mum's boy, who was spoiled, got his way and was more streetwise than him. Shawn knew how to get his needs met by asking his grandmother ("the classic Black granny") or by skirting around the rules.

Based on his intelligence, it is clear that he often knew what needed to happen, but sometimes his rules were more important than others'. He also understood that women had good reasons for the decisions they made, like sending him to live with his grandparents for a better education. People in this family value truth, fun, religion, family first, and taking action and not sitting on the side line.

According to his early recollections (ERs), Shawn feels that it is a man's world and men will protect themselves when they feel threatened by hurting others. When he knows something bad is going to happen, he will always put his family first. He will break the rules if he needs to, but does not want to get into trouble when he does this. *"I do not want others to see when I put my needs first. Being a man of action, who happens to be Black, I feel angry and stuck in a world that won't let me in and let me be free. I just want to dive in."*

Shawn has many strengths including being able to know the rules, being loyal and not letting others take advantage of him. He is also willing to take action and take responsibility for them. He feels connected to men and knows that they can help him. Shawn may have trouble realising that women can help him too as he feels he needs to solve problems on his own. It is important for him to be right, but this may hurt others.

Michelle was the youngest girl of three siblings, in a family that valued hard work, education, religion, athletics, integrity, fun and being proud of their Black heritage. There were different rules in the family depending upon gender. John (+ 6), the first child, excelled at athletics, had high standards and sought Dad's favour. Although he was not always good at school and rebellious, John was the "Golden Child" in the family. Ronda (+ 3) found her place through her medical condition and absorbing her parent's attention. She also received significance through her good grades, dance recitals, getting her own way and being the most spoiled. Michelle played athletics with John and found her place by being the hardest worker, helping around the house, being obedient and trying to please; however, when these tactics did not work she did throw tantrums to get her way. Tantrums were a powerful tool as the family did not like conflict and valued a calm atmosphere.

Her parents were community leaders. Mum was a type A personality, while Michelle modelled her father's easy-going personality. She grew up realising that it was hard to beat her sister or to challenge her spirited mother; so it was best to take the gentle approach and feel safe, but not knowing when to speak up and share her thoughts.

According to her ERs, Michelle sees the world as a place for women, especially women that teach her about race, history, and who encourage her to change her views on herself. Women will also frequently confront Michelle about what she says, and she feels bad and embarrassed when she gets caught. Sometimes she will say things, particularly about race, and it will get her into trouble. She feels that she lives in a White world, and she is unsure of how she looks in this world.

Michelle's is curious about her future and her experience of being Black, but is also concerned about others' feelings. Even though it is difficult for her, she will share her opinion but generally keeps her ideas and feelings to herself, as she could get into trouble for sharing them. She is able to figure out the rules of a situation and would talk behind other people's back to avoid their not supporting her.

#### **Conceptualisation**

Michelle and Shawn have many overlapping Life Style components that assist in their positive (i.e., conflict free) functioning in the Life Tasks. They are young African-American professionals who have been married for less than a year and who have recently had a daughter. Their relationship was mostly long distance prior to marriage and they are proud that they did not live together before. Their roles are evolving and many of their problems are part of the normal developmental challenges as they develop new roles of being partners and parents.

Both Michelle and Shawn are loyal to their families and to people they respect. They both want to know the rules of situations. Shawn sounds very similar to John, Michelle's brother, while she reminds him of his grandmother. Shawn and

Michelle both share common values of fun, loyalty to family, wanting to know the rules, religion, doing what is right, being parents that raise a respectful child, proud of being African-American and finding support in the Black community. Both are figuring out their own voice with different genders. Both are interested in finding their place in their racial identity together. Both are also invested in figuring out how to manage a racist culture.

They are a good match because on the one hand, Michelle is gentle and will not treat Shawn unfairly. She will be a sensitive woman, not one that treats him unjustly on purpose but they will do better if they discuss the rules ahead of time. On the other hand, Shawn is a good mate for her because he will take action in regard to their home life and will be more involved in the family than many of the other men she knew.

In terms of Adler's five Life Tasks (Mozak & Dreikurs, 1994a, b, c), there is a lot of harmony in the spiritual task, the family task and components of the love task that help support the couple's marriage and new family. For example, in the spiritual task, for both, their faith guides their lives and values; they view God as giving them peace and that His word is final. Both of their families also get along and share many of the same values. Their Life Styles impact on the love, work, social/friend and self-care tasks differently.

The love task encompasses co-operating, encouraging and loving your partner. Both spouses see strengths in their marriage. Shawn believes they are a great team at solving problems and taking the time to learn each other's perspective. Michelle believes their similar values and goals constitute the foundation of their relationship. They also connect through growing up in

the same geographical area, though they did not meet until they were adults. Sex is enjoyable and not a problem. They learned through religious pre-marital counselling that their love language is touch and to be with one another after a disagreement.

Leisure activities are more limited now due to the arrival of a baby but they like to go to dinner, movies and concerts. Their co-operation with maintaining the house seems to be dictated by situations and conditions as opposed to a more open structure. They agree to let Shawn take the lead with finances since that is his strength.

Shawn and Michelle need help in how to communicate directly and how to manage when they cannot get what they think is right. In their families of origin, no one modelled open discussion and resolution of conflict and, therefore, they may go behind each other's back for a solution. Shawn's strength with conflict is in taking action at the risk of hurting Michelle by deciding what is best for them. Michelle is figuring out how to have a voice, but could hurt Shawn by going behind his back.

They are both in the same developmental process with the self-care task in regards to their own growth of who they are as partners and new parents.

Michelle and Shawn turn to each other for support and connect with other African-Americans for assistance as well as their Church. The importance of race and identity was implicitly and explicitly communicated through their direct answers to questions as well as in their ERs.

In an attempt to understand the couple better, the authors asked many questions about the relationship. As part of this understanding, it was important to assess how race has affected the partnership. This includes how both feel about being African-American and whether issues of racism, both personal and systemic experiences, and oppression have affected them. The questions regarding their relationship included: "Who do you want to be as a couple?" "What are the strengths of your relationship?" "What do you do as a couple for fun?" "How did you decide to divide up the work of being a couple?" "How do you get along with each other's friends?" and "Is there anyone you don't like and why?"

Michelle shared that it was empowering for her to be African-American: "*I gain strength from knowing what my ancestors went through.*" For her, focussing on these strengths is important since negative stereotypes regarding African-Americans are prevalent in their-larger society. Shawn also indicated that he was aware of them and that he tries to live his life in such a way as not to reinforce them: "*Society says that we have all these bastard kids and that we leave our women to raise our kids and that we get all types of assistance.*" It is important for Shawn to be both a good partner and a good parent. Together they support each other and attempt to understand their personal experiences with racial discrimination.

Based on their Life Styles, they are complementary in their careers. As an accountant, Shawn is focussed on numbers and rules, while Michelle concentrates on feelings. She is currently training in the field of mental health. They will need to work at providing the kind of support that both value.

They may think they are helping the other but it may not be the kind of assistance he or she desires. Michelle will need to learn more about conveying facts and Shawn more about expressing his emotions.

#### **Treatment Plan Based Upon Life Style Assessment**

Michelle and Shawn do not really listen to each other. They are often stuck in wanting to be right or feeling superior and discouraged, and not able to understand or "hear" what the partner says. The couple needs to begin to practise a *daily dialogue* (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003). On the even days of the calendar, one partner will talk for 5 minutes, then the other for 5 minutes. Then, on the odd days, the other partner starts first. Each gets a chance to talk and to listen to the other partner and nothing more. Over time they will deepen their insights and understanding of each other.

Shawn and Michelle live in different gender worlds and they need to widen their perspective in order understand each other. Michelle and Shawn are asked to do the *encouraging days* exercise (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003). This activity requires that each partner makes a list of 7-10 small pleasant behaviours the other can do that will please him or her. Behaviours should be specific, positive and unrelated to past conflicts between them. Behaviours are chosen that are possible for the partner to do on a daily basis. These lists are then exchanged. Each partner should try to do two encouraging behaviours each day. One item is added to the list each week. This list is the key to each partner's heart.

In order to reinforce the positive exchanges between them, Shawn and Michelle are asked to organise an *encouraging meeting* every day after their daily dialogue. This involves having each partner say one thing that happened to him or her during the day that he or she enjoyed and one thing the other partner did that he or she appreciated. Hope for the relationship comes from encouragement and increasing the positives in their togetherness. The goal is for Michelle and Shawn to have four positive exchanges for every one negative (Gottman & Gottman, 2015).

To learn about marriage and the rules they want to have as a couple, Shawn and Michelle are asked to begin working on a *marriage mission statement* (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003). The marriage mission statement can help them to develop mutual goals and to design the type of relationship they want. They will need to list what they believe, want, support and value in their relationship. Some sample questions to be answered within the mission statement include: "How do we want to act as husband/father and wife/mother? (Due to the collectivistic values of this couple, they are not asked to differentiate between wife/mother and husband/father). "What are we all about, what is our identity as a couple?" "What is the purpose of our marriage?" "What do we want in our family?" "What are five or six of our values?" "How do we encourage one another?" "How will we divide responsibilities up?" (p. 10)

Shawn and Michelle need to learn to communicate specifically in the Life Task areas. What they do for leisure or fun, how they parent together and share the work of being married. They are a good match and only need to learn how to value and validate one another. Shawn needs to lead without taking away Michelle's choice and Michelle needs to use her voice while

respecting Shawn. They need to learn how to face conflict and have courage together when it is about the couple/family. They need to set aside time each week for a *marriage meeting*.

The marriage meeting is another tool that Michelle and Shawn can use to help to stay focussed on their goals, while dealing with the numerous problems and challenges of daily life (Berger, 2014; Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003). When couples move in together, whoever sets up the kitchen or puts away the tools is in charge of those activities. Hopefully, they can negotiate a more equitable arrangement provided that this is discussed. Weekly meetings to deal with business of the partnership need to be scheduled. As problems occur during the week that cannot be resolved quickly, partners are instructed to write them down and save them for the next meeting. The suggested meeting agenda for Shawn and Michelle should include old and new business; positive things they like, discussion on work and chores, plans for fun, and any current problems and challenges. They can discuss most items on the agenda following the guidelines provided in *Time for a Better Marriage* (Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 2003).

Michelle and Shawn also need to learn how to negotiate conflict and understand that temper shuts this process down, as does silencing the other partner or talking behind one another's back. Adlerian couple therapists teach a *four-step problem-solving process*. The way couples deal with conflict determines whether or not the dissension will be harmful to their marriage. Failure to deal with this constructively is the most powerful force in dampening marital satisfaction. Unresolved disagreement may also be the most prominent cause of divorce as these issues tend to be rehearsed. Michelle and Shawn need to learn the *four-step problem-solving process* to help them resolve differences and

conflict. The therapist can teach the couple each of the steps as indicated by Carlson and Dinkmeyer (2003):

1. Mutual respect;
2. Identify the real issues;
3. Look for areas of agreement; and
4. Both participate in the solution.

Michelle and Shawn need to continue their religious practice and other activities where they can be companions. This will help them pursue their life purposes and support one another in a world that does not treat all people equally.

Finally, they need to learn about how to share parenting roles and to be equal partners. This is hard for many African-American families, since the father has traditionally had a marginal role. So, it may be hard for Shawn to step up despite his stated goals, but it might even be more difficult for Michelle to let go of her customary parental role. Taking a parenting class would be another important move for them. It would indeed be helpful for them to learn a new method of parenting as well as to meet with other couples, and discuss whom they see as good role models and what kind of parents they want to be.

### Conclusion

African-American couples may need to learn new skills if they want to be happy together as a couple. After a Life Style assessment, the specific skills that Shawn and Michelle needed to learn were identified and tailored for them.

Both partners are eager to acquire the required knowledge and practice in order to have a satisfying marriage. This is often the case with newly married couples. It is important to treat them as though they just need training and not a therapeutic treatment.

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