Self-Efficacy and Early Recollections in the Context of Adlerian and Wellness Theory

Heather Pomeroy and Arthur J. Clark

Abstract

Self-efficacy relates to individuals' beliefs in their ability to respond to challenging situations. Theoretically, self-efficacy is inherent in the Adlerian principles of the lifestyle, social interest, and holism. Self-efficacy is also integral to wellness theory in the broad context of a person's life. As a projective technique, early recollections provide an incisive means for appraising the qualitative level of self-efficacy.

Keywords: Individual Psychology, wellness, self-efficacy, early recollections

Self-efficacy involves a belief in one's ability to surmount challenges and to anticipate success in the face of adversity (Sherer & Adams, 1983). If people feel capable of managing situations and overcoming obstacles, their self-efficacy is higher than that of others who do not experience a sense of competency in meeting the same level of difficulties (Bandura, 1997, 2004). As a personality construct, self-efficacy relates to the Adlerian or Individual Psychology principles of lifestyle, social interest, and holism. Through the lifestyle, which illuminates an individual's long-term, ingrained beliefs, it is possible to observe expectations of success and personal control inherent with self-efficacy. Social interest encompasses an individual's compassion toward others and a striving to contribute to the welfare of other people (Adler, 1933/1964). Social interest also entails a sense of belonging and identification with other individuals, and persons with these qualities have been found to have a significantly greater sense of self-efficacy (Curlette & Kern, 2010; Dinter, 2000). Holism emphasizes the unity of an individual's personality in confronting the tasks of life relating to intimate relationships, work, and community (Adler, 1931/1958; Fall, Holden, & Marquis, 2010). Persons with higher levels of self-efficacy have a more optimistic outlook on life and a greater sense of control in the face of adversities relating to health, family, and work difficulties (Cervone, 2000; Maddux, Brawley, & Boykin, 1995).

The theory of wellness also relates to Adlerian theory in the context of holism (Myers & Sweeney, 2008; Sweeney, 2009). In this regard, "holism honors the whole person and the integrated expression of the parts
working as a whole” (Fall et al., 2010, p. 104). Wellness involves a coherent integration of human functioning in order to achieve the most favorable level of health. The goals for an individual in a quest toward optimum wellness relates to a striving to achieve a deeper understanding and perception of self through the development of physical, intellectual, social, occupational, emotional, and spiritual capacities. Without an understanding of the Adlerian conception of holism, however, the theory of wellness is difficult to fully grasp.

It is also therapeutically important to understand early recollections in the context of Adlerian and wellness theory. Adler thought that individuals recall relatively few memories from early childhood, and that these recollections provide a tested means of what life is like or about (Adler, 1927, 1937). Therefore, in counseling, early recollections contribute to an awareness of clues or hints about a client's fundamental outlook on life (Clark, 2002, 2013). For example, an early recollection involving a childhood memory in which the client feels capable when managing a particular challenge suggests that the individual has a relatively high level of self-efficacy. The aims of this article are to examine the relationship between self-efficacy and Adlerian and wellness theory, and to clarify the use of early recollections in understanding a client's self-efficacy.

Adlerian Theory

The principles of lifestyle, social interest, and holism represent significant features of an Adlerian orientation in counseling and psychotherapy. Understanding each of these constructs contributes to grasping the relationship between early recollections as a projective technique and self-efficacy.

Lifestyle. Frequently, the qualitative level of an individual's self-efficacy is apparent in the context of one's lifestyle. Early recollections provide a means for evaluating the lifestyle by gaining a sense of a person's unique outlook on life. In Adler's view, people are responsible for the choices they make, and their perceptions of experiences influence their personality functioning (Adler, 1933/1964). Adler thought that an individual's basic orientation to life crystallizes in early childhood, and the convictions established during that period are reflected in the lifestyle. Consequently, a person's lifestyle reflects core beliefs of the world. In this regard, Adler (1931/1958) wrote, “Early recollections have a special significance. To begin with, they show the style of life in its origins and in its simplest expressions” (p. 74). In a particular example, an adult male named John recalls asking his father to remove the training wheels from his bicycle. Although John's father
was uncertain about taking the training wheels off of the bicycle, he decided to listen to John. John felt unsteady when he first began to ride without the training wheels, but then he began to gain his balance and ride successfully. He experienced a sense of delight in his accomplishment.

Social Interest. The concept of social interest is integral to the relationship between early recollections and self-efficacy. Adler felt that one of the main motives of human functioning is to strive for a sense of belonging and identification with other people (Curlette & Kern, 2010), and the development of social interest involves the capacity to experience empathy through an emotional bond with others (Clark, 2007; Watts, 1996). In Adler's (1933/1964) view, social interest becomes manifest in either normal or abnormal behavior, depending on the extent of constructive functioning. Early recollections can assist a counselor in appraising a client's degree of social interest and self-efficacy. For example, a female recalls playing with a friend and dressing and combing the hair of their dolls. This memory involves a theme of social interest by demonstrating cooperation and caring on the part of the individual. Her self-control and competence suggests a higher level of self-efficacy.

Holism. The concept of holism in Adlerian theory relates to an individual's functioning as an integrated whole, with feelings, beliefs, and actions representing a dynamic unity of personality. Holism "reflects a philosophical belief that mind and body are one intertwined process that is lost when those aspects are separated" (Fall et al., 2010, p. 104). This type of balance among all components of the personality comprises a coherent and integrated level of experiencing. If one or more areas are lacking or insufficient, the person will not feel whole and will function in a less integrated way. Through the use of early recollections, however, the counselor is able to gain a sense of a person's holistic functioning. For example, an individual recalls an early recollection in which he makes a mistake while answering a question in the classroom and the other students laugh at him. In this instance, he feels socially rejected by the other children and that his sense of incompetence is apparent.

Wellness

Since self-efficacy involves the self-perceptions of individuals and the world around them, it is important to clarify the relationship between self-efficacy and wellness theory. To understand a person more fully, it is necessary to perceive the self through the lens of interconnected patterns of
functioning. Wellness can be understood as “a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully within the human and natural community” (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000, p. 252). For people to reach optimum well-being, all major aspects of their functioning need to be working together. For example, as the Wheel of Wellness demonstrates, there are many components of life that are complementary in areas such as work, friendship, and love. If an individual attains fulfillment only in the area of work, then other capacities that constitute the wheel, such as love or friendship, will be lacking. As a consequence, the achievement of an optimum state of health and well-being becomes more remote.

Another model of wellness is the Indivisible Self, which is representative of the core self. This model is consistent with the ideas of the Wheel of Wellness and the Adlerian concept of holism. Surrounding the core self are five second-order factors: creative self, coping self, social self, essential self, and physical self (Sweeney, 2009). Similar to the Wheel of Wellness, it is the combination of these factors that make up the core self or the whole self. Changes in one aspect of the self will affect the other areas that make up the whole self. As counselors, it is important to understand the major concept of wellness and the idea that there are many aspects involved in developing and maintaining optimum health. All of these factors involved in wellness can be influenced by a person’s self-efficacy and, in turn, affect the overall emotional well-being of the individual.

Self-Efficacy

For counselors and other mental health practitioners, qualitatively understanding the level of a person’s self-efficacy is essential to grasping the issues that the client presents as well as the course of action to be taken in the treatment process. Importantly, people who believe they can manage stressful events will be relatively less affected by those situations (Bandura, 1997). Since self-efficacy involves the extent to which individuals feel capable of handling a challenging situation, those who feel more capable will be more likely to manage various stressors. Conversely, people who experience low self-efficacy generally will not feel capable in handling the obstacles that they encounter, and when a stressful situation occurs will be affected by this event in maladaptive ways.

Persons who demonstrate higher self-efficacy may potentially act in ways that reduce their stress and make their environment manageable and less stressful (Bandura, 2004). For example, two people both fail the same test. A person with a relatively high degree of self-efficacy looks at
the failure, views it as a learning experience, and decides to try harder on the next exam. The individual acknowledges that additional studying is required and that it is possible to do better in the future. In contrast, a person with a low degree of self-efficacy looks at the failed test and feels a strong sense of inadequacy as a learner. The self-efficacy of these two individuals significantly affects how they perceive the given situation and how they manage a stressful environment.

Individuals with a high degree of self-efficacy demonstrate superior coping capabilities; have better control over their cognitions or thoughts; and are able to calm themselves and relax in an otherwise stressful, anxiety-provoking situation (Bandura, 1997). Having control over one's thoughts can have a measurable impact on performance. The development of the ability to regulate intrusive cognitions as well as the attainment of adequate coping skills is representative of the quality of a person's self-efficacy.

By grasping the importance of the role of self-efficacy, counselors can begin to understand how high versus low self-efficacy manifests in an individual's everyday life. For example, those with low self-efficacy may be more likely to demonstrate symptoms of depression because they are less apt to control depressive thoughts and cope with stressful situations (Bandura, 2004; Cervone, 2000). However, those with high self-efficacy tend to be more optimistic and not only feel capable of controlling a stressful situation but also are able to calm and reassure themselves in the process. Knowing how self-efficacy relates to an individual's lifestyle "may help clinicians identify clients who are more ready for therapeutic movement compared to those who are likely to require more encouragement and support in order to make significant progress" (Dinter, 2000, p. 463).

Not only is self-efficacy integral to a client's lifestyle patterns, but research has shown that the construct can also have health effects as well. Those individuals who feel capable of managing themselves in stressful situations are more likely to cope with situations positively and more willing to pursue endeavors that contribute to better health (Bandura, 2004).

**Early Recollections**

Engaging early recollections as a counseling technique can be particularly useful in identifying a client's unique perceptions of oneself, others, and events in life (Clark, 2002, 2013). Thus, early recollections can provide the counselor with a framework relating to ingrained perspectives from the point of view of the client (Kopp & Der, 1979). Utilizing first memories in an initial session in the counseling process enables the counselor to attain a deeper understanding of the client's lifestyle and self-efficacy. Since early
recollections vary from person to person, exploring the meaning behind the memories is important when trying to use the recollection to determine that individual’s self-efficacy. Additionally, early recollections contribute to the assessment of a person’s wellness functioning. In the following examples, two contrasting cases highlight differences between individuals demonstrating high and low self-efficacy. The counselor elicits a client’s early recollection and subsequently asks three follow-up questions (Clark, 2002).

**Example 1.** Mary, a 24-year-old female just finishing college, is seeking a career in the human services field. Mary is not concerned about finding a position because she knows that she is qualified for many of the jobs for which she has applied. This type of confidence extends beyond Mary’s career interests, as people seek out her company because of her engaging and optimistic way of being.

**Counselor:** Think back to a long time ago when you were little, and try to recall one of your earliest memories, one of the first things you can remember.

**Mary:** One of my first memories was being at the beach with my mother and father and older sister and having such a nice time. I was watching my sister swim and she seemed so good at it. I wanted to try, so I went in the water. It felt cool at first, but then I got used to it. I thought I would then try swimming so I could go further out into the water. I can remember not knowing if I was doing it right, but I kept trying. At first I started going under and I swallowed a little bit of the salt water. I think I began to panic and got nervous. I wasn’t sure if I should go back to shore or keep swimming, but I didn’t want to go back so I kept kicking even harder. Before I knew it I was moving in the water all by myself.

**Counselor:** Is there anything else you can recall in the memory?

**Mary:** I can remember going under at first but then getting a burst of energy that allowed me to keep kicking harder so I stayed afloat.

**Counselor:** What part do you remember most in the memory?

**Mary:** I guess the good feeling I got when I was able to do this on my own.

**Counselor:** How are you feeling at that point?

**Mary:** Well, very happy, I was so proud of myself.

In this example, Mary begins her recollection by explaining being at the beach with her family, which suggests a theme of social interest and her sense of belonging. Next, Mary recalls beginning to try to swim on her own and taking in some water. At that point she is unsure of herself, as she does not know if she is capable of swimming. Mary continues the recollection by explaining that once she goes under, she considers returning to shore, but in the end she decides to try harder and is ultimately successful. Mary concludes her memory feeling happy and proud of herself.
As a counselor, it is important to evaluate how this early recollection relates to Mary's level of self-efficacy. When considering this recollection, it is likely that Mary generally feels capable and is able to face challenging situations with a sense of competency in dealing with adversities. This suggests that Mary has a relatively high level of self-efficacy. Also, when giving consideration to Mary's overall wellness, in the context of her life, she demonstrates a pattern of striving toward constructive goals and appears to balance the major domains of functioning. In Adler's view, "a mentally healthy person will courageously meet the tasks of life with adaptable problem-solving strategies that always take into account the welfare of others" (Fall et al., 2010, p. 113). The brief early recollection appraisal suggests that Mary attempts to meet the challenges she faces and actively strives to solve problems, instead of becoming burdened by them.

**Example 2.** Mike is a 24-year-old male who is currently unemployed and experiencing relationship problems. Mike has been reluctant to apply for positions that he is qualified for, as he does not feel capable enough. This feeling of inadequacy carries over into Mike's relationships, as he often complains about his imperfections, which tends to push any friends or family away. Mike relates the following early recollection.

**COUNSELOR:** Think back to a long time ago when you were little, and try to recall one of your earliest memories, one of the first things you can remember.

**MIKE:** Well, one of the first things I can remember is being at the beach. I was there with my parents and my brother and sister. We were all out on the sand and I can remember watching my brother and sister playing together in the water. They didn't want me to play with them, and I wanted to swim anyway. Eventually I got up and went toward the water. At first I stuck my toe in and it was so cold, I got a bad feeling almost immediately. Then a wave came out of nowhere and I slipped and fell in, the water coming over my face. Before I knew it I was underwater and I panicked. I started coughing because I had swallowed some of the salt water. I was so scared that I ran back to my blanket and didn't want to go in for the rest of the day.

**COUNSELOR:** Is there anything else you can recall in the memory?

**MIKE:** Just being disappointed that I couldn't go out in the water.

**COUNSELOR:** What part do you remember most in the memory?

**MIKE:** Wishing I could swim, but the water seemed too dangerous for me.

**COUNSELOR:** How are you feeling at that point?

**MIKE:** I guess just disappointed, almost defeated because I couldn't swim like everyone else.
In the example, Mike mentions being at the beach with his family and wanting to play with his siblings, but he was not involved in their play and appears to have been unacknowledged by his family. Mike explains that once he put his toe in and was knocked over by a wave, he felt scared and defeated and decided to retreat back to the shore, where he knew it was safe. At the end of the recollection, Mike feels defeated and lonely.

Several aspects of this early recollection are notable in ways that contribute to an understanding of Mike's lifestyle or outlook on life. At the conclusion of the recollection, Mike feels incapable of action. His attempts at learning and succeeding at something new have failed, and he thinks that it is better not to try in order to be safe than to try and be unsuccessful. In major aspects of his life, Mike resists trying anything new and faces challenges with a high level of anxiety, as he feels incapable of handling and coping with stressful situations. This is representative of Adler's safeguarding tendency of distancing complex and low self-efficacy, as Mike avoids challenges and problems through a self-deceptive evasion of perceived obstacles (Clark, 1999, 2000). Because Mike feels incapable of coping with stressful situations, his uncertainties and doubts compromise an active pursuit of personal relationships and career activities. Since these areas of his life are not in balance, Mike's overall wellness suffers.

With respect to Mike's ability to adjust to new situations, he is less able to do so in a purposeful way. In this regard, Adler believed that people were not mentally ill but rather discouraged. He described maladjustment as "pursuing a goal on the useless side of life, that is, striving for superiority with a decreased sense of social interest" (Adler, 1933/1964, p. 100). Mike's early recollection suggests that he tends to feel neglected and to see situations and people as discouraging. Because social interest is critical to the development of the personality and self-efficacy, Mike's relative lack of social interest relates to how he views himself and others.

When eliciting early recollections, it is important to keep in mind the purpose of the memories as a counseling tool. Early recollections provide the counselor with a framework for understanding a client's outlook and perspectives of life. In relation to lifestyle, clarifying the viewpoint of the client, the counselor is able to evaluate an individual's level of self-efficacy. Not only are counselors able to gain insight into their clients' self-efficacy through early recollections; that understanding can inform the qualitative wellness level of clients. When primary areas of life are not in balance, the possibility of attaining optimal wellness becomes more remote. Last, eliciting several early recollections, perhaps three, and employing multiple assessments beyond the projective technique, contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the client.
Conclusion

Self-efficacy involves an individual’s perceptions of capabilities and self-control. Early recollections provide a framework for apprehending the lifestyle and frequently suggest a qualitative level of self-efficacy. An understanding of a person’s self-efficacy contributes to gaining a sense of the individual’s overall wellness. Wellness emphasizes being able to balance primary aspects of one’s life in order to achieve optimum well-being.

References


**Heather Pomeroy** (heatherpomeroy@yahoo.com) is a therapist at Haven House Services, Raleigh, NC. She works primarily with children and adolescents in individual and group counseling.

**Arthur J. Clark** (aclark@stlawu.edu) is a professor in the counseling and human development program at St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY. He is the author of *Early Recollections: Theory and Practice in Counseling and Psychotherapy* and *Dawn of Memories: The Meaning of Early Recollections in Life.*