

# Psychological Strategies

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This column focuses on counseling, clinical issues, and psychotherapy, including innovative strategies for aiding clients. Potential contributors are encouraged to submit manuscripts to Paul R. Rasmussen, Department of Psychology, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Hwy, Greenville, SC 29613 USA.

## **Expanding the Acting As If Technique: An Adlerian/Constructive Integration**

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Individual Psychology and Adlerian psychotherapy contain many tenets that resonate with those from both cognitive constructivist and social constructionist perspectives.

For Adler, persons must be ultimately understood in social context; it is in relationships that humans have their meaning. . . . Psychological theories tend to be either individualistic or collectivistic—in the former community disappears; in the latter, the individual disappears. Adler's views, on the other hand, are a healthy balance of the individual rooted in relationships. (Jones & Butman, 1991, p. 237)

Individual Psychology resonates with the philosophical assumptions of social constructionism regarding the sociocultural origins of human psychological development. In addition, it affirms cognitive constructivism's emphasis on the importance of humans as active agents creatively involved in the co-construction of their own psychology. The Adlerian perspective states that the individual arises from the social but is not the same as, nor reducible to, the social. Individual Psychology is a holistic perspective that eschews viewing humans in a reductionistic manner. It affirms that knowledge is socially embedded and relationally distributed but does not empty the self. Adlerian

theory embraces a *both/and* position, accounting for and affirming that knowledge and experience are a co-construction of self and others in a socially embedded matrix (Carlson & Sperry, 1998; Peluso, 2004; Shulman & Watts, 1997; Watts, 1999, 2003a, 2003b; Watts & Critelli, 1997; Watts & Phillips, 2004; Watts & Shulman, 2003; Watts, Williamson, & Williamson, 2004).

Not only do Adlerian and *constructive* (cognitive constructivist and social constructionist) therapies share significant common ground regarding both epistemology and the socially embedded nature of human knowledge, they also share similar clinical/practical characteristics: Both strongly affirm the importance of the therapeutic relationship; both are optimistic and present/future oriented; and both focus primarily on clients' strengths, resources, and abilities rather than their weaknesses, deficits, and disabilities (Carlson & Sperry, 1998; Jones & Lyddon, 2003; Lewis, 2005; Mahoney, 2003; Neimeyer, 2003; Watts, 1999, 2003a, 2003b; Watts & Critelli, 1997; Watts & Phillips, 2004; Watts & Shulman, 2003; Watts et al., 2004).

Given the significant similarities between Adlerian and constructive perspectives, it is not surprising to find that interventions discussed in the constructive therapy literature are either similar to or congruent with ones used in Adlerian therapy. Nor is it surprising to see significant opportunities for technical integration between the two. In this report, we present an integration of the acting as if technique—from Adlerian therapy—and procedures common to constructive approaches to counseling and psychotherapy.

### **As If and Acting As If**

One specific area, among many, that Adlerian and constructive therapies share is that both see value in using the as if quality of human experience in counseling and psychotherapy. Mahoney (2003), a prominent constructivist author, stated that a significant influence on "later constructivists such as Alfred Adler and George Kelly" (p. 5) was Hans Vaihinger's book, *The Philosophy of As If*. Based on the human propensity for engaging in daily activities as if some things were absolute values, Vaihinger explored the pragmatic function of mental fictions. Adler's acting as if technique and Kelly's fixed role therapy technique are both clearly derived from Vaihinger's influence. According to Carlson and Sperry (1998),

[The] Adlerian technique *Acting "as if"* reflects the constructivist perspective. When someone has difficulty acting prosocially, that is, speaking assertively or responding with some measure of empathy, the clinician might encourage [him or her] to act "as if" they were assertive or empathic several times a day until the next session. The rationale for this reconstruction strategy is that as someone begins to act differently and to feel differently, they become a different person. (p. 73)

Indeed, social psychologist Daryl Bem has demonstrated the effectiveness of acting as if in his Self-Perception theory. According to Bem (1972), humans form self-attributions, that is, conclusions about the self by observing themselves much like they form conclusions about others by observing them. While Bem does not present Self-Perception theory as a clinical tool, his work demonstrates the effectiveness of this Adlerian approach to change. This empirically validated idea also resonates with procedures commonly used in constructive therapies (e.g., enacting the miracle, exceptions, or preferred outcomes). In fact, constructivists often use the Adlerian technique nomenclature—acting as if—but seldom mention Adler's pioneering work. Acting "as if" affords a client the opportunity to enact alternative or preferred outcomes and possibly to re-story oppressive aspects of his or her personal metanarrative (or "lifestyle," in Adlerian parlance).

### **Expanding the Acting As If Technique: The As If Reflective Process**

The *as if reflective process* is an integration of Adlerian and constructive counseling and psychotherapy ideas.

As mentioned above, clinicians using the Adlerian acting as if technique ask clients to begin acting as if they were already the person they would like to be; for example, "a confident individual" (Carlson & Sperry, 1998; Mosak, 1979; Sweeney, 1998). The process asks clients to pretend and emphasizes that they are only acting. The purpose of the procedure is to "bypass potential resistance to change by neutralizing some of the perceived risk" (Watts, 2003a, p. 73).

The integrative *as if reflective process* expands the Adlerian technique by having clinicians ask 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. (Watts, 2003a, p. 73)

This reflective process has three phases. In Phase 1, the therapist uses reflective questions to access the creativity and imagination of clients. In Phase 2, the client and therapist co-construct an action plan based on the clients' reflective thinking. In Phase 3, the final phase, clients implement the as if behaviors and they discuss their experience in session with the therapist.

*Phase 1.* The therapist uses reflective questions such as the following:

- If you were acting as if you were the person you would like to be, how would you be acting differently? If I were watching a videotape of your life, what would be different?

- If a good friend would see you several months from now and you were more like the person you desire to be or your situation had significantly improved, what would this person see you doing differently?
- What might be some initial indicators that would demonstrate that you are headed in the right direction? (For more examples of reflective questions, see West, Watts, Trepal, Wester, & Lewis, 2001.)

*Phase 2.* Subsequent to the reflective questioning phase of the process (Phase 1), the client and therapist co-construct a list of as if behaviors that are indicative of how the client will act as he or she moves toward his or her desired goals. After developing the list of behaviors, the client—in dialogue with the therapist—ranks the as if behaviors from least difficult to most difficult. The client is now ready to begin enacting the behaviors.

*Phase 3.* Prior to the next counseling session, the client selects one or two of the least difficult behaviors to begin enacting. Commencing with the least difficult behaviors increases the potential for client success, and success is typically encouraging for clients and often increases their perceived self-efficacy. Having had some success, clients' motivation to engage courageously the more difficult tasks on their list is usually stronger.

In the following sessions, the client(s) and therapist discuss the enactment of the as if behaviors selected for the previous week. Enacting new behaviors often helps clients perceive themselves, others, and the world differently. One may erroneously assume that Adlerian therapy asserts that *insight* always precedes behavior change. To the contrary, Adlerians often use action-oriented procedures—such as acting as if—in order to facilitate perceptual alternatives. The Adlerian therapeutic process, like that of many constructive therapies, seeks to change clients' "doing" and "viewing" and to "invoke their strengths, assets, and abilities" (Watts & Pietrzak, 2000, p. 443).

As the client attempts the more difficult tasks on his or her as if behavior list, it is crucial that the therapist encourage him or her to frame success in terms of effort and potentially smaller amounts of successful movement. Clients may be more patient and find the process less frustrating if they understand success in terms of effort and incremental growth rather than simply final outcomes (Watts, 2003a).

### **Clinical Uses and Case Example**

So when might a therapist use this technique? We believe that it has useful purposes any time a therapist is trying to effect a change of behavior that requires altering basic life schemas or personal stories, changes in the client's characteristic way of acting in certain situations, or whenever a client is choosing to relate to other people in a different way; thus, the *As If Reflective*

*Process* is especially appropriate to use with couples and families. We offer the following brief case example to illustrate this point.

Lynn and Ralph (not their real names), a couple in their mid-30s, had been referred for couples counseling by Lynn's individual counselor when Lynn expressed a lack of desire for her husband and said that she was contemplating divorce. Lynn and Ralph had only been married for 2 years, following a 3-year admittedly difficult courtship. Both were highly successful professionals, but recently Lynn felt disappointment with Ralph, "He's just not a good husband." She stated in the initial session: "We both work, but he expects me to do all of the housekeeping. I don't have time to do it, and I need his help!" She added, "In addition, he is frequently staying late at the office and I am all alone at home!"

Ralph acknowledged that he was "not the perfect husband." The therapist immediately sensed an excuse for Ralph's behavior and reframed his comment saying: "You don't really expect that Lynn wants you to be a perfect husband, after all nobody is perfect!" Ralph acknowledged this, and said "Well, she doesn't like me as I am; I guess I could be *better*." The therapist explored this further and Ralph admitted that he "just didn't know how to do it. I mean, I tried to please Lynn but nothing worked. Finally, I guess I stopped trying." Lynn immediately jumped on this and listed eight different things that Ralph was not doing that she had specifically asked him to do. It was apparent by Ralph's non-verbal behavior that he had heard all this before and was dismissing it in his mind. Sensing the dismissal, the therapist suggested that they try a different approach to solve the problem.

The therapist initiated the As If Reflective Process. In Phase 1, the therapist used many of the reflective questions above to stimulate and clarify Lynn and Ralph's desired end-product. Specifically, the therapist asked Lynn, "How will you know that Ralph is acting differently?" Lynn answered, "I would feel loved. I would feel secure, like a wife should be." This indicated that Lynn had a set of beliefs regarding what a "good" husband should be and that it would be important to explore this once the initial behavior change had occurred (i.e., Phase 3). When pressed for a more concrete, behavioral indicator of progress, Lynn answered "We would do things together, I wouldn't be alone all of the time." When asked to imagine what they would look like a few weeks from now after acting this way, she stated "You'd see us doing things together around the house and being in contact with each other."

Ralph was asked what would be different if he were a "better" husband (using his word); he said "Well, I would *want* to come home as early as I can. I might even think to ask Lynn out with me when I have to go to dinner with a client." The therapist also asked if Ralph had any role models—real or fictional—of "better" husbands. Ralph suggested that the character of Paul in

the television series *Mad About You* seemed like a very attentive and good husband. When asked what Paul did that he did not, Ralph said "Well, he's always kissing his wife and saying he loves her. He also tells her a lot of his 'silly' thoughts that I wouldn't normally think to do. He also seems to call her a lot and they are always doing things together." From this, he, Lynn, and the therapist were able to move to Phase 2.

In Phase 2, the couple and the therapist developed the list of behaviors that Ralph agreed would indicate that he was a "better" husband. For example, Ralph agreed that he would start off by calling Lynn at least 2 times a day from work. In addition, they agreed that for every waking hour that they spent apart (outside of the 9 to 5 work day), they would spend one hour together. This allowed them to balance the amount of time alone versus the amount of time together, relative to their needs. They also included the more "difficult" behaviors listed above.

In Phase 3, Lynn and Ralph were able to indicate what was working, and what was not as they added more difficult behaviors on to the list of "better husband" behavior. While they reported feeling closer and more satisfied with each other, Lynn experienced some additional feelings of disillusionment. At this point, the therapist began to explore some of her assumptions about marriage, as well as some of the additional systemic issues that were contributing to the initial presenting concern. In particular, the therapist explored Lynn's relationship with her father as the "model" for a husband. Her idealized view of her father was more complicated than she originally thought. In particular, she recalled that although her father was a good provider, he was also often distant and preoccupied with work. The therapist proposed to the couple that Lynn's "demands" were actually cries for connection and a desire to avoid loneliness. At the same time, she was able to accept that her own drive to be better was, in part, due to his role modeling. She, the therapist, and Ralph were able to use the as if reflective process to expand the ideal of being "better" to a holistic idea of being better in all areas of life (i.e., in the tasks of life) without sacrificing *any* of them.

## Conclusion

The *As If Reflective Process* is an integration of Adlerian and Constructive perspectives that seeks to extend the traditional use of the Adlerian acting as if technique. Prior to asking clients to engage in acting as if, the therapist encourages the clients to tap into their creativity and imagination via the use of reflective questions. This reflective process helps clients and therapists collaboratively reflect upon and select behaviors that may increase the likelihood of success and may be useful in evaluating treatment progress.

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