

# Reflecting “As If”: An Integrative Process in Couples Counseling

Richard E. Watts  
Baylor University

---

*An integration of Adlerian and social constructionist ideas, the reflecting “as if” technique asks clients to take a reflective step backward to consider perceptual and behavioral alternatives as a prelude to their acting as if they were the couple they desire to be. This article describes the reflecting as if technique and provides a brief case study demonstrating its use.*

---

The reflecting “as if” process is an integration of Adlerian and social constructionist counseling ideas. Adlerian and social constructionist therapies have many similarities. In particular, they share the following clinical/practical characteristics: Both strongly emphasize the importance of the therapeutic relationship; both focus on clients’ strengths, resources, and abilities; and both are optimistic and future oriented (Hoyt, 1994; Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996; Watts, 1999, 2000; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000).

The traditional Adlerian acting as if technique asks clients to begin acting as if they were already the person they would like to be; for example, “a real man” (Carlson & Slavik, 1997; Mosak, 1979; Sweeney, 1998). The Adlerian idea asks clients to pretend and emphasizes that they are only acting. The object is to bypass potential resistance to change by neutralizing some of the perceived risk.

The integrative reflecting as if procedure asks clients to take a “reflective” step back prior to stepping forward to act as if. This process encourages clients to reflect on how they would be different in their relationship if they were acting as if they were the couple 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 (Andersen, 1991; Freedman & Combs, 1996; O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Schneider & Stone, 1999; Walter & Peller, 1992; Watts, 2000; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000; West, Watts, Trepal, Wester, & Lewis, 2001; White & Epston, 1990).

## THE REFLECTING AS IF PROCESS

The reflecting as if process has three phases. The first phase accesses the creativity and imagination of clients by using reflective questioning. The second phase creates a structured plan of action based on the couple’s reflective thinking. In the last phase, the couple implements the as if behaviors and then discusses the experience in session with the counselor.

### Reflecting

The counselor uses reflective questions similar to the following:

- If you were acting as if you were the couple you would like to be, what would you be doing differently? What would your relationship look like?
- If a close friend were to see you 6 months from now and your relationship had significantly improved, how would you be acting differently as a couple?
- What will be some initial indicators that you are headed in the right direction? (See also West et al., 2001.)

### Planning

After the couple have engaged in the reflecting phase of the process, the counselor and couple coconstruct a list of as if behaviors indicative of how the couple will act as they move toward the relationship they desire. After constructing the list, each partner is to rank the as if behaviors in terms of difficulty (from *least* to *most*). Now the acting as if may begin in their daily relationship.

### Implementing

Prior to the next session, each partner focuses on one or two of the least difficult behaviors. Beginning with the least difficult behaviors increases the likelihood of success, and success tends to increase clients’ perceived relational self-

efficacy. With some success behind them, clients are more likely to engage the more difficult relational tasks on their list with courage and motivation.

In the next session (and subsequent sessions), the couple and counselor discuss the enactment of the as if behaviors selected for that week and any resulting perceptual alternatives. Engaging in new behaviors often helps create dialogic space whereby the partners are able to perceive themselves and their relationship differently. As the couple attempts the more difficult relational tasks, it will be important for the counselor to help the couple frame success in terms of efforts toward relational growth and potentially smaller increments of forward movement. The couple may be more patient and find the process less frustrating if the counselor helps them to focus on efforts and incremental growth rather than ultimate outcomes (Watts, 2000; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000).

### CASE STUDY

Billie and Tom (not their real names) came to see me because of escalating conflict in their marriage. After completing the standard intake and informed consent information, we spent the remainder of the first session hearing each partner's story about the relationship. Near the end of the session, I gave the couple a copy of the three reflective questions discussed earlier: "If you were acting as if you were the couple (or person) you want to be, what would that look like and what would you be doing differently?" "If I were to see you six months from now and your relationship was significantly better, how would I see you acting differently in your relationship?" "What will be an early indication that you are headed in the direction you want to go in your relationship?" We briefly discussed the questions, and I asked the couple to answer the questions individually during the coming week and bring their responses to the next session.<sup>1</sup>

During the next session, we discussed each partner's answers and asked for clarification and more specificity when needed. In summary, the partners agreed that their initial as if reflections indicated they both had needs that were not being met in the relationship and that these unmet needs were the root of the hostility and inappropriate expressions of anger in their relationship. After discussing their answers to the reflective questions, the couple agreed that they were ready to begin developing solutions to their problems. I explained the process of "creating the plan of action," and we discussed the process in detail to ensure the couple understood. Based on our previous discussions, each partner created an initial list of five behaviors that would help meet an unmet need in the relationship. We discussed both lists and ranked the behaviors in terms of difficulty, and each partner selected two least difficult behaviors that they would focus on for the coming week. Because Tom realized that Billie often felt ignored, he selected "remembering to tell Billie that I love her at least

once a day" and "blocking out at least 10 minutes a day to talk with Billie without any distractions." Billie realized that Tom often retreated when she responded with anger and hostility. In consequence, she selected "when I'm angry, I will choose to take a break before I talk with Tom" and "using 'I statements' rather than 'you statements' when talking with Tom." At the end of the session, I asked the couple in the coming week to individually expand the list of behaviors that would indicate they were headed in the direction they want to go in their relationship and to bring their lists to our next session.

During the third session, we discussed the behaviors that they focused on for the week. Both indicated that although there was some initial difficulty, they began to sense a difference in their relationship; both felt more hopeful because it seemed that their partner was trying to make a difference. We talked about what they appreciated about each partner's behaviors, how the behavior helped the relationship, and how each partner might expand the behaviors for their partner's benefit. We then discussed the expanded list, focusing on specificity and clarity. Again, I asked each partner to rate the behaviors in terms of difficulty. Each partner selected two additional behaviors for the coming week to add to the two previously selected.

This pattern continued for the remaining five sessions. Frankly, some behaviors were more easily integrated into the relationship than others were. As the tasks increased in perceived difficulty, the couple decided to begin adding only one behavior between sessions, and some of these required further discussion, evaluation, and adjustment. However, the couple demonstrated significant progress because they could discuss, evaluate, and adjust without the escalating hostility that was evident when they first presented for counseling. In addition, they expressed increased satisfaction about their relationship.

### CONCLUSION

The reflecting as if process, an integration of Adlerian and social constructionist perspectives, expands the traditional use of the Adlerian acting as if technique. Prior to action planning and encouraging client action, the intervention accesses client creativity and imagination via use of reflective questioning. This procedure provides a bit more structure to the traditional Adlerian intervention, helps clients and counselors collaboratively reflect on and choose behaviors more likely to result in success, and may be useful in evaluating treatment progress in counseling.

### NOTE

1. Some counselors may prefer couples to do all of the "reflecting" phase of the process in session.

## REFERENCES

- Andersen, T. (Ed.). (1991). *The reflecting team: Dialogues and dialogues about the dialogues*. New York: Norton.
- Carlson, J., & Slavik, S. (Eds.). (1997). *Techniques in Adlerian psychology*. Washington, DC: Accelerated Development.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: Norton.
- Hoyt, M. F. (Ed.). (1994). *Constructive therapies*. New York: Guilford.
- Mosak, H. H. (1979). Adlerian psychotherapy. In R. J. Corsini (Ed.), *Current psychotherapies* (2nd ed., pp. 44-94). Itasca, IL: Peacock.
- O'Hanlon, W. H., & Weiner-Davis, M. (1989). *In search of solutions: A new direction in psychotherapy*. New York: Norton.
- Rosen, H., & Kuehlwein, K. T. (Eds.). (1996). *Constructing realities: Meaning-making perspectives for psychotherapists*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schneider, M. F., & Stone, M. (Eds.) (1999). Narrative therapy and Adlerian psychology [Special issue]. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 54(4).
- Sweeney, T. J. (1998). *Adlerian counseling: A practitioner's approach* (4th ed.). Philadelphia: Accelerated Development.
- Walter, J. L., & Peller, J. E. (1992). *Becoming solution-focused in brief therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Watts, R. E. (1999). The vision of Adler: An introduction. In R. E. Watts & J. Carlson (Eds.), *Interventions and strategies in counseling and psychotherapy* (pp. 1-13). Philadelphia: Accelerated Development/Taylor & Francis.
- Watts, R. E. (2000). Entering the new millennium: Is individual psychology/Adlerian therapy still relevant? *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 56, 21-30.
- Watts, R. E., & Pietrzak, D. (2000). Adlerian encouragement and the therapeutic process of solution-focused brief therapy. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 78, 442-447.
- West, J. D., Watts, R. E., Trepal, H. C., Wester, K. L., & Lewis, T. F. (2001). Opening space for client reflection: A postmodern consideration. *The Family Journal*, 9, 431-437.
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: Norton.

**Richard E. Watts, Ph.D.**, is an associate professor and director of the Counseling Program in the Department of Educational Psychology, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

### WILLY 'N ETHEL by Joe Martin



## **Request Permission or Order Reprints Instantly**

Interested in copying, sharing, or the repurposing of this article? U.S. copyright law, in most cases, directs you to first get permission from the article's rightsholder before using their content.

To lawfully obtain permission to reuse, or to order reprints of this article quickly and efficiently, click on the "Request Permission/ Order Reprints" link below and follow the instructions. For information on Fair Use limitations of U.S. copyright law, please visit [Stamford University Libraries](#), or for guidelines on Fair Use in the Classroom, please refer to [The Association of American Publishers' \(AAP\)](#).

All information and materials related to SAGE Publications are protected by the copyright laws of the United States and other countries. SAGE Publications and the SAGE logo are registered trademarks of SAGE Publications. Copyright © 2003, Sage Publications, all rights reserved. Mention of other publishers, titles or services may be registered trademarks of their respective companies. Please refer to our user help pages for more details: <http://www.sagepub.com/cc/faq/SageFAQ.htm>

**[Request Permissions / Order Reprints](#)**