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What is This?
Early Recollections: Enhancing Case Conceptualization for Practitioners Working With Couples

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Early recollections are valuable resources for practitioners to enhance further understanding of the interactions related to couple relationships. To illuminate conceptualization for couple therapy, suggestions are made regarding the use of early recollections and the implications for practice. The authors provide a case study in which current research and techniques in the interpretive process are used and discussed.

Keywords: early recollections; couple therapy; lifestyle; assessment; interpretation

As couples navigate the transitions and events experienced daily, they are faced with two unique individual perceptions and expectations within the relationship. Each individual has his or her own style of direction and purpose. It is as if they are both in a boat, paddling on a river that contains both placid and turbulent sections. The integrity and purposeful direction of the boat may withstand as the individuals work as a couple whose expectations are understood. The prospects of the upcoming journey involve perceptions of self, events, and interaction of each individual. These perceptions will dictate how they will engage on their endeavor. When the individual’s perception of purpose and navigation are severely conflicting, the boat’s integrity and direction may be compromised as they veer into troublesome obstacles. Decision-making strategies, levels of initiative, activity levels, and safety issues are relevant within their journey as a couple.

Satir (1967) suggested that the interpretation of self can influence issues such as self-esteem, “differentness,” and communication styles that may be visible within mate selection. These are not characteristics that come to fruition during the relationship, but manifest themselves through roles and expectations each person may carry for him or her and for the partner. Therefore, preconceived notions may directly influence the interaction of the couple. Adler’s concept of purposeful behavior involves this goal-oriented stance of behavior (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Here, an individual will assign meaning to relationships with things, self, others, and events in a purposeful manner. By assigning meaning, an individual gains some guidance in present and future action.

Adler believed that early childhood events were central in the formation of meaning. An individual’s early recollections are significant resources for understanding an individual’s perspective on life. According to Adler, the selective memory illuminates the individual’s lifestyle and is essential for understanding the individual (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). In a memorable statement, Adler’s idea is emphasized by the following:

Among all psychological expressions, some of the most revealing are the individual’s memories. His [sic] memories are the reminders he carries about with him of his own limits and of the meaning of circumstances. There are no “chance memories”: out of the incalculable number of impressions which meet an individual, he chooses to remember only those which he feels, however darkly, to have a bearing on his situation. Thus, his memories represent his “Story of Life”; a story he repeats to himself to warn him or comfort him, to keep him concentrated on his goal, and to prepare him by means of past experiences, so that he will meet the future with an already tested style of action. (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 351)

Thus, it seems that there may be some relationship between early recollections and the ways in which an individual approaches situations. These early recollections serve as a frame of reference for an individual’s lifestyle, and they may glean certain information regarding an individual’s percep-
tion of self, others, and situations. Therefore, it seems relevant to examine the early recollections of individuals-within-couples to enhance the therapeutic relationship. When combined with additional assessment procedures, early recollection evaluation may be quite illuminating in the treatment process for couples.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The interest in early memories and early recollections has prevailed for more than 100 years. In 1893, Miles is cited as the first to inquire about early memories (as cited in Clark, 2002). Here, Miles asked college students about their first memory and related this questionnaire to life functioning. More recently, the *Journal of Individual Psychology* (Clark, 2004) has dedicated a special issue regarding early recollections and the relevance of its use in assessment. Exploring style of life of the individual offers guidance in treatment procedures and in the process of therapy. Discussing early recollections can foster a therapeutic relationship and can support guidance. Clark (2002) suggests, “The disguised quality of the instrument also minimizes response distortion while enabling the counselor to understand ingrained convictions of an individual” (p. 3). Thus, client resistance may be diminished as the therapeutic relationship is enhanced. Individuals may respond to the request of providing early recollections in an open and eager manner. This process enhances the validity of the assessment process and will guide future interaction with the clients. The practitioner gains vital understanding of how the clients perceive the world. Kern, Belangee, and Eckstein (2004) believe that the clients gain insight on “how the client solves major problems related to the life tasks of work, social relationships, and intimate relationships” (p. 135). Furthermore, Kern et al. cite that this information can be used as an educational resource for individuals as they initiate problem-solving skills. Kern et al. discuss questions, procedures, and suggestions pertinent to gathering and interpreting early recollections to instill change in clients. By examining the wealth of information within early recollections, one can seek to understand the process by which couples can proceed within their own relationship. For couples, this information can be quite revealing as they gain insight into their perception of relationships. The relationship is not only with each other but also with events, others, and self. Early recollections illuminate relationships as a “person can be in relationship to others, to novel events, to taking initiative or risk, or to activity or passivity, and so on” (Manaster & Mays, 2004, p. 109). This information can reveal how each individual within the couple might engage transitions, events, others, and each other. In a discussion concerning early recollections, Manaster and Mays (2004) agree that if given “only one shot at understanding an individual’s personality lifestyle, I would choose that person’s earliest recollection” (p. 114). For the practitioner, this understanding of an individual’s personality lifestyle translates into additional information concerning how to proceed in his or her own interaction with the individual and, consequently, the couple.

Rather than asking general questions related to early experiences that require review of several memories, we are suggesting gathering the first memory recalled by the individual. Directed memory recall is when the individual is asked questions pertaining to specific situations, events, or circumstances. This directed procedure involves verbal prompts for the individual to recall the first memory involved in the specific situation, event, or circumstance. Spontaneous procedures usually involve a general question for the person to recall the first memory that comes to mind.

The application of early recollection assessment is not a novel concept within couple therapy. There is substantial literature depicting the collection of early memories with couples. As a result, there are several procedures for use of early recollections as an assessment source. For some, early memories are also examined to gain understanding of interpersonal dimensions. Rotter and Cretzmeyer (1998) review the use of early recollection assessment as it relates to memories of the actual couple relationship. These memories are specific to the actual couple relationship, thus they are gained by asking directed questions to each individual within the couple. Eckstein, Welch, and Gamber (2001) provide a specific procedure called the Process of Early Recollection Reflection (PERR) by which early recollections are gathered for couples and families. For the PERR, individuals are asked to provide early recollections spontaneously to discuss, understand, and possibly rewrite early experiences. In the event of an individual not being able to recall anything, Eckstein et al. include some prompting questions such as “Can you remember an early birthday party?” (p. 203). Once each member of the family or couple has written their respective early recollection, these early recollections are openly discussed with partners or family members. The PERR involves each person rating themselves on specific issues of role, feeling, and clarity within their own recollections. The goal is to discuss, understand, and possibly rewrite these early experiences to advance the therapeutic atmosphere.

Clark (2002) offers a comprehensive illustration of the use of early recollections in his book titled *Early Recollections, Theory and Practice in Counseling and Psychotherapy*. Clark provides an overview of theory, history, research, and procedures of early recollections and assessment. Furthermore, Clark supplies specific questions, a thematic analysis, a syllogism worksheet, and suggestions for interpretation. We suggest that this reference is a compelling format that can be used with couple therapy. For the purposes of this discussion, only a few examples will be provided as readers are encouraged to consult Clark’s book for additional information.
Because Clark (2002) offers specific questions for eliciting early recollections for individuals, only slight adjustment is necessary for their use with couples. For this strategy, when a practitioner asks a client to recall an early memory, there should be attempts to avoid directing the client’s perception of what is recalled. These recollections should be spontaneously reported. Prompting the client to situations, age, and developmental stages can be suggestive and may be problematic for this particular procedure. Also, because a discussion of their early recollections may be spontaneously provided by at least one of the partners within the couple, it may be necessary to have each person complete the procedure by writing the recollection without discussing the recollection. If a discussion about an early recollection is allowed, this may influence or prompt the other partner to recall a specific event that might otherwise be neglected. Once each partner has provided spontaneous recollections in a written manner, the discussions can ensue as each partner can take turns verbalizing their recollections.

Clark (2002) suggests that when a client is confused about what to say during the procedure, simple directions are critical. Therefore, restating the question while providing encouragement may suffice in order for recall to be realized. For instance, simply stating, “Whatever one of your first memories that comes to your mind,” (Clark, 2002, p. 92) may be used. The first vital question concerning the earliest recollection is followed by three specific questions. The therapist begins with, “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 that you can remember.” Afterwards, once each individual has completed the recall, Clark (2002) suggests three follow-up questions: “Is there anything else that you can recall in the memory?” “What part do you remember most in the memory?” “How are you feeling at that point?” Or “What feelings do you remember having then?” (p. 93).

The first follow-up question is asked to gather any details and clarification for vague references. The second question involves the identification of vivid aspects; the central theme of the early recollection can be identified with this second question. The third question relates to the client’s affect to the central theme. Depending on the client and the situation, more early recollections can be reported by the client and can aid in examining and clarifying themes that are central for the client’s perceptual experience. Clark (2002) suggests that three recollections can be sufficient in the information gathering process.

In the interpretation process, it is necessary to examine thematic variables illustrated by Clark (2002). He provides a table that presents the thematic variables organized in a tripartite rubric of self, others, and events, and practitioners may make reference to this chart when interpreting early recollections. The binary variables in the chart represent topics commonly found in the literature in relationship to early recollections. (p. 105)

Clark suggests that there could be more thematic variables worthy of attention. However, our experience is that they certainly provide an organizational and useful tool for examining themes. Furthermore, Clark provides additional detailed worksheets in order for full understanding and organization to occur for the practitioner. These early-recollection worksheets provide a helpful avenue by which each early recollection can be suitably interpreted within themes, details, and relationships (Clark, 2002, p. 131). Using this descriptive framework throughout the therapeutic process enhances case conceptualization.

**CASE STUDY**

The following case example illustrates how early recollections can be used as an assessment of the various relationships for each individual within a couple. Although the individuals are not currently reporting any significant difficulties within the relationship, they do describe experiencing a major transition. Samantha (Sam), 29, and Luke, 30, are the pseudonyms that they have chosen. Luke has accepted a new job in a different city causing a weekly commute. Sam is in her second trimester of a first-time pregnancy. The couple has been married for 2½ years. Both have obtained graduate degrees and are in the public safety profession. In collecting these early recollections, we adhered to the procedure illustrated earlier. The following will be a synopsis of three memories reported by each individual.

Early recollection # 1 (Sam): “I was about 4-years-old and was either in nursery school or day care. I was continuously talking during nap time, which caused the substitute teacher to become angry. The first course of action was to put me in the corner. Well, this did not work and lead to a second measure. I distinctly remember the substitute teacher putting tape over my mouth and making me sit down in a corner. The next thing that I can remember was my mother coming in and seeing me with the tape on my mouth. I remember my mother was furious and then she took me out of class.” When asked about the most vivid part of this memory, Sam stated, “Looking up at my mom and seeing how furious she was at the substitute teacher.” When asked about how she was feeling at the time, she stated, “I was scared, not from my mother’s rage, but from the situation in general.”

Early recollection # 2 (Sam): “I was about 6-years-old. I remember my father (who was in the military) telling my family we were going to have to move to a different state. Well, we had a black lab at the time and his name was Joe. My parents informed me that he could not come with us. I remember giving the dog away, with my mother at my side and both of us crying.” When asked about the most vivid part, Sam stated, “Standing with my mom and watching the dog leave.” When asked about how she was feeling at the time, Sam stated, “extremely sad.”

Early recollection # 3 (Luke): “I was about 7-years-old and was either in nursery school or day care. I was continuously talking during nap time, which caused the substitute teacher to become angry. The first course of action was to put me in the corner. Well, this did not work and lead to a second measure. I distinctly remember the substitute teacher putting tape over my mouth and making me sit down in a corner. The next thing that I can remember was my mother coming in and seeing me with the tape on my mouth. I remember my mother was furious and then she took me out of class.” When asked about the most vivid part of this memory, Sam stated, “Looking up at my mom and seeing how furious she was at the substitute teacher.” When asked about how she was feeling at the time, she stated, “I was scared, not from my mother’s rage, but from the situation in general.”

Early recollection # 4 (Luke): “I was about 8-years-old and was either in nursery school or day care. I was continuously talking during nap time, which caused the substitute teacher to become angry. The first course of action was to put me in the corner. Well, this did not work and lead to a second measure. I distinctly remember the substitute teacher putting tape over my mouth and making me sit down in a corner. The next thing that I can remember was my mother coming in and seeing me with the tape on my mouth. I remember my mother was furious and then she took me out of class.” When asked about the most vivid part of this memory, Sam stated, “Looking up at my mom and seeing how furious she was at the substitute teacher.” When asked about how she was feeling at the time, she stated, “I was scared, not from my mother’s rage, but from the situation in general.”

Early recollection # 5 (Luke): “I was about 9-years-old and was either in nursery school or day care. I was continuously talking during nap time, which caused the substitute teacher to become angry. The first course of action was to put me in the corner. Well, this did not work and lead to a second measure. I distinctly remember the substitute teacher putting tape over my mouth and making me sit down in a corner. The next thing that I can remember was my mother coming in and seeing me with the tape on my mouth. I remember my mother was furious and then she took me out of class.” When asked about the most vivid part of this memory, Sam stated, “Looking up at my mom and seeing how furious she was at the substitute teacher.” When asked about how she was feeling at the time, she stated, “I was scared, not from my mother’s rage, but from the situation in general.”

**CASE STUDY**

The following case example illustrates how early recollections can be used as an assessment of the various relationships for each individual within a couple. Although the individuals are not currently reporting any significant difficulties within the relationship, they do describe experiencing a major transition. Samantha (Sam), 29, and Luke, 30, are the pseudonyms that they have chosen. Luke has accepted a new job in a different city causing a weekly commute. Sam is in her second trimester of a first-time pregnancy. The couple has been married for 2½ years. Both have obtained graduate degrees and are in the public safety profession. In collecting these early recollections, we adhered to the procedure illustrated earlier. The following will be a synopsis of three memories reported by each individual.

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Early recollection # 2 (Sam): “I was about 6-years-old. I remember my father (who was in the military) telling my family we were going to have to move to a different state. Well, we had a black lab at the time and his name was Joe. My parents informed me that he could not come with us. I remember giving the dog away, with my mother at my side and both of us crying.” When asked about the most vivid part, Sam stated, “Standing with my mom and watching the dog leave.” When asked about how she was feeling at the time, Sam stated, “extremely sad.”
Early recollection #1 (Luke): “Well, I think I was 6-years-old. My brother and I were staring out the window watching a neighborhood fight. What happened was a Hell’s Angel guy had a dog who had bitten the FBI’s daughter, causing a huge fight in the middle of the street. . . . I remember watching out the window and seeing my father move in to confront the two men and break it up.” When asked about the most vivid aspect, he stated, “Watching my father go break up the fight.” When Luke was asked how he felt at the time, he stated, “I was interested and excited.”

Early recollection #2 (Luke): “I remember that I was 7. I remember my family lived in the neighborhood where most of my memories occurred. My mother and aunt were going on a very long road trip to visit relatives. At this time, my family owned a station wagon, and I was sitting in the very back of it. We had packed everything on the top of the car, and I remember that my family had specifically purchased cartons of cigarettes for a friend, and they were packed on top of the car as well. I can remember driving down the road and everything falling off of the top of the car. I was watching the cigarettes fly out of the cartons and hit the ground. So then we had to stop and pick everything up.” When asked about the most vivid part, he stated, “sitting in the back and just watching everything fall off of the back of the car, particularly the cigarettes.” Luke had trouble identifying a particular feeling other than awareness.

Early recollection #3 (Luke): “Well, in this memory I was 8. Again, this memory takes place in my childhood neighborhood. I specifically remember the dog next door barking and barking. I remember me and everyone else in my family trying to quiet the dog; however, the dog would not shut up. I can remember later finding out that the reason the dog was barking was that the house next door was being robbed and inside of it were guns and drugs, leading us to become aware that the neighbors were drug dealers.” When asked about the most vivid part, he stated, “trying to get the dog to be quiet over and over.” When asked about feelings at the time, he stated, “frustration.”

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Obviously, the usefulness of early recollections in couple therapy increases when rapport has previously been established. The likelihood of sharing information is increased as the therapist gains information concerning individual lifestyles. The use of early recollections with couples, in addition to other assessment tools, is emphasized to gain a more accurate and holistic frame of reference. A complement of interviews, observations, and alternative projective techniques can be useful throughout the therapeutic process to gauge understanding and conceptualization. Also, Clark (2002) notes, “The conceptualization provides a tenable framework in the early stages of therapy for guiding counseling practice. As knowledge about a person accrues, the rubric evolves, but continues as a stabilizing dynamic for assessing progress in counseling” (p. 166). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the entirety of the individual as rapport develops. As stated earlier, Clark (2002) discusses several dichotomous thematic variables that aid the interpretation process (i.e., active-passive, encouraging-discouraging, etc.; p. 105). These variables allow interpretation of how one may relate to self, others, and events. When interpreting Sam’s and Luke’s early recollections, there are several themes that may impact the couple’s shared dealings with upcoming transitions.

For Sam, the first two recollections display passivity as her mother assumes a supportive role. It seems that she perceives others as being reliable. She is able to rely on others for safety (leaving the class) and solace (saying good-bye to her dog). Thus, she may perceive herself as an acceptable person who others value. The third recollection indicates a level of competency and sense of worth. She sees herself accomplishing a goal and feeling excited. However, when she feels threatened, sad, or uncertain, she may seek comfort in others because of her feeling valued yet passive. Sam may depend on Luke for problem solving and rely heavily on his support during the upcoming events. The second recollection involves similarity to the current situation. The act of moving may not be coincidentally defined. Instead, this theme may be relevant as she seeks support for this change. It is possible that Sam may see the transitional events as manageable. These events can be negotiated successfully with perseverance and support from others.

Luke reported two memories in which he displayed passivity. However, he is active in observation. Although Luke reports a more passive role in these recollections, they are both action oriented and proceed to a resolution (a fight being stopped and materials being picked up and reorganized). Also, his feelings are directly connected to the activity as he perceives enjoyment in observation and awareness. Luke reports that he learns from observation and kinesthetic methods. In the third recollection, he displayed a more active stance. Although he reports feeling frustrated with the inability to affect change, he realizes that it is not his ability that is lacking. An interesting finding was that his current profession deals with affecting change in criminal behavior. The current transition to move may be validating his competence in professional choice. Thus, it seems that his early recollections are goal directed and congruent with his current lifestyle. Also, it is interesting that his wife shares his professional interest as she works with similar populations. Luke may perceive himself as having the capacity to be successful, organized, and goal directed. Thus, he seems to perceive himself as competent. This seems complementary to Sam’s ability to rely on others and may help the couple through transition. An interesting finding was that Luke mentioned others in his
memories, not in protective roles but as outsiders experiencing similar events. Currently, Sam’s profession dictates that she experiences similar events in their lifestyle together. Others may be perceived as worthy, as they demonstrate behaviors that are similar to Luke’s interests. Events may be perceived as constructive, as they will result in resolution. Also, the events may be stimulating as the resolution solidifies. Therefore, the current events may be perceived as constructive and stimulating for Luke. It seems that he maintains a sense of optimism for transitions.

CONCLUSION

The above case study illustrates the depth of information inherent in early recollections. When explored, these recollections are a source of discovery. However, reviewing the entire context of the individual is necessary in the exploration of early recollections. As the therapeutic relationship evolves, so does the understanding of the individual. Also, using the interview process, observation, and alternative projective techniques may be useful in obtaining comprehensive information. The use of early recollections with couples can be an abundant resource of information for the practitioner and the couple. These early recollections give the practitioner a sense of understanding for the lifestyle of the individuals within the couple. Meanwhile, the recollections provide clarity for the couple as they learn the perceptions by which they are guided. Because the interaction of the couple inherently possesses two manifestations of perceptions, these views should be processed accordingly. These perceptions can indicate purpose and direction for the relationship of the couple.

REFERENCES


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Kara Pechersky is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina in the Counselor Education Program. She is an experienced school-based mental health therapist in Lexington, South Carolina, Mental Health, Child Adolescent, and Family Services.