

# New Aspects of Early Recollections (ER) as a Diagnostic and Therapeutic Device

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Early recollections (ERs) refer to specific events that a person believes to have taken place within the first few years of his life. The individual unconsciously selects, distorts, or invents memories to fit his underlying mood, purpose, and interest. In 1907 Adler held that a person has an active part in what he remembers, and in 1911 he dealt with a particular case for the first time (Ansbacher, 1973). Later he said: "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 bearing on his situation. Thus his memories represent 'a story of my life'; a story he repeats to himself to warm 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" (Adler, 1958, p. 73).

It is not all-important that the present first memory or earliest recollection is indeed the first one, or that the ER describes the actual past event. An ER may be considered a creative construction of the individual. Ansbacher (1973, pp. 135-145) states: "A recollection as a purposeful construction was quite at variance from Freud's concept of early memories as screens of traumatic sexual experience." Mosak and Kopp (1973, pp. 157-166) dealt at some length with these differences, while analyzing first memories of Adler, Freud, and Jung.

When asking for early recollections, one insists on specific events. It is not advisable to record early history at this point of a life style analysis. Early history reports frequently start with: "I used to . . .," or "When I was small, I had a habit of . . .," etc. ERs begin with: "One time . . .," "It happened when I was small . . .," or with similar specifics. The ERs are briefly recorded together with the approximate age at which the event is believed to have taken place. At times, ERs are quite involved. Then the analyst asks for the highlight or most important aspect of the ER. He also inquires about, and records, the emotion or emotions accompanying the memory.

ERs are one of the most essential parts of an Adlerian life style analysis and, among other things, uncover the life fiction or goal of superiority of which the individual is not totally, or not at all, aware. A psychological life style

analysis, used by Individual Psychologists since the early twenties, corresponds to a psychological or psychiatric diagnostic interview or simply to an attempt of understanding the whole person, body, soul, and mind, in his social and ecological environment. Techniques of life style analyses, developed by Adler, have been refined in recent years by Dreikurs (1967, pp. 95-102), the author (1974, p. 40), and others (Manaster & Perryman, 1974, p. 237).

This paper deals specifically with early recollections. ERs are valuable because they reflect the person's present-day attitudes and intentions. These intentions may be conscious but more often are unconscious, that is: A person is only half aware or not aware at all of his final or fictitious goals. Basic attitudes are largely influenced by a person's subjective opinions about himself and others. These opinions, attitudes, and goals are unified into a life style in early childhood. Adler's contention was that the life style was formed and firmed up by the very young child (Adler, 1930, p. 81). He also maintained that the very earliest recollection reveals to the experienced clinician the essence of a person's personality.

For many years in my clinical and teaching practice I have experimented with ERs in hundreds of cases and have come to the following conclusions:

1. While one memory can give us some understanding of a person's functioning and social interaction, more early recollections offer more specific information on a person's life style. The author has found seven to be an optimal number. Papanek recommends five to ten ERs (Papanek, 1972).

A 47-year old minister with three children remembers as his earliest recollection

riding in a dark, closed-up car on the way to his grandparents. He then sees himself climbing steps. Above are standing grandpa and grandma. The highlight is the movement toward the beloved grandparents; and the feeling is happiness.

This memory tells us about striving, the goal being to reach the loving, protecting, and possibly indulging grandparents. To achieve this goal the minister has to exclude the rest of the world.

In the second memory the somewhat older child (age 3-4) is sitting with the family in church. He leaves his seat to go and sit under the pulpit from which his grandfather is preaching. The feeling still is a good one.

The subject leaves the family pew to profit from someone else's "fame" in order to feel more significant himself. The feeling of smallness was not as strongly expressed in the first memory. In it there were only he and his goal. In the second recollection he has to leave "the human community" and sneak under the pulpit to partake in personal superiority.

In the third memory (age 5) he tells about the upstairs neighbor, who "spoiled us, my brother and me." The neighbor played Santa Claus. Mother told the neighbor that we had done something wrong. Very shortly after this, Santa Claus knew of this. The feeling was amazement.

The new life style aspect introduced in ER 3 is intellectual curiosity.

ER 4 (age 5-6) tells about his parents leaving the house, and the brothers screaming and fussing terribly despite grandma's presence. The feeling is disappointment and frustration at parents' leaving.

Here we suspect an added life style trait of attempts at willful dominance over others.

ER 5 took place at the same time. The community nurse came to visit mother. It was very cold and the streets were icy. The nurse had woolen socks slipped over her shoes. "I was amazed."

This, again, shows intellectual curiosity.

At ER 6 the subject was six years old and remembers his first day in school. (Following an old custom, parents, when picking up their children from school, bring them some sweets packed in a very special container.) The subject received his sweets in just an ordinary bag. He was disappointed.

This expresses his present-day attitude of "the world is unjust to me."

In the seventh memory, at the same age, he received a boy scout uniform and proudly showed it off in the street.

He tries to obtain self-worth feelings through outward appearance but also through group identification — a positive note.

The first memory shows that the subject is striving to reach a high goal of being loved, protected, and possibly indulged. The goal is difficult to reach, and the outside world has to be excluded. Memories two to seven show up the present-day life style aspects: The feelings of smallness and insignificance which tend to be compensated by his partaking in someone else's fame or superiority. One also learns about the search for knowledge and understanding, about willful dominance over others, a feeling of being treated unjustly and another attempt to attain self-worth feelings, this time through outward appearance and group identification.

2. The first two or three memories often represent the present-day attitudes and intentions. The next two or three show a developmental trend, while the last one or two of the seven ERs usually reflect a process of social maturing and increased cooperativeness.

A 47-year old school principal, married, one child, his first memory at age two that he was in bed with a cold and was not allowed to play outdoors, where he heard others palying. Barefooted, he jumped out of the window in order to join the playing. He had felt unjustly confined.

Apparently, the unjust treatment was more important as a feeling aspect than the risk he took in doing something about it.

ER 2 (age 4-5) informs us about the subject's playing with his ten months older cousin. "We dug holes into the sand and put marbles into them." He did the rough work, while the cousin specialized in precision work. This annoyed him. He pushed the cousin and, in turn, was beaten up by the cousin's older brother, whereupon the subject tried to kick the older brother. Again, he felt unjustly treated, this time because he had had to do all the rough work.

The theme is the same as in ER 1: I am treated unjustly and am taken advantage of, and my defensive kicking back is unsuccessful.

ER 3 took place at age four. "We visited grandma and grandpa. Someone put three large spoonfuls of salt, instead of sugar, into my coffee. Everybody tried to make me drink it. Then grandpa tried it, spit it out, and swore about its taste. He then comforted the little one." The feeling is extreme frustration.

The theme still is "the world is unjust to me, and I am taken advantage of because I am small and therewith handicapped." (The subject is, indeed, small, several inches shorter than his wife.)

In the fourth ER the boy is already seven or eight years old. His brother had annoyed him and, upon that, he struck out with a fork and injured his brother. He felt guilty and was then especially nice to this older brother. Feelings: annoyance and guilt.

The new development in ER 4 is the subject's being successful in his attempt to deal with a situation of injustice, although through a negative act, which he tries to rectify by feelings of guilt.

As ER 5 he remembers (age 5) that he had taught himself to swim without the knowledge of his parents. When later his mother took him to a pool, he swam out to the middle and screamed: "Help, I'm drowning." Mother paled in panic and tried to save him. She fell sick afterwards. The feeling was pride of achievement, not a power struggle, he recalled.

As in ER 4, a change in his development is observed which now is even more pronounced. Smallness is overcompensated by extraordinary achievement which had to be dramatized.

As ER 6 (age 6), the subject remembers having defended a boy younger than himself by beating up his aggressors.

This shows us in which direction he is moving. He has more feelings of self-worth now; some social interest is showing and this time not in its pseudo-form: guilt. We still notice some slight overcompensation; "Small as I am, I am yet able to beat up other children."

In the seventh memory (age 6-7) he plays on the ice with other children. One boy breaks into the ice. The subject rescues him. The feeling is pride.

The theme is much like in ER 6: growing social interest and feelings of self-worth.

The first three memories represent present-day attitudes. In the case above they show feelings of unjust treatment and frustration. The next two show a development trend. Feelings of inferiority and of unjust treatment are compensated and overcompensated by bold action combined with guilt-feelings and regret. The last two memories represent the growing social feelings in the attempt to help and defend others. Not clear is whether these acts were performed out of genuine social feeling or for self-glorification. It may be assumed that a combination of both motives was the case.

3. If a person of at least average or normal intelligence can not produce any early recollections before the age of six or seven, this may represent a resistance toward the interviewer, but more often it indicates that the reality of the early years of this person's life does not agree with the subjective or fictional character of a person's life history on which his life style is based.

A 46-year old divorced social worker, working in a large industrial firm in a very competitive situation, was married for eight years. She has no children. In her

Earliest recollection (age 7) she overheard her maternal grandmother saying: "Father doesn't pay enough attention to the girl." The feeling was sadness.

The basic life style aspect, communicated by this memory, is: "I am unloved, rejected."

The second memory, somewhat earlier, was introduced with the following remark: "but this was something positive." The Bishop had visited the school and the girl had been allowed to recite a poem. The feeling was great pride.

She seems to be saying that only if she performs as an exceptional person can she get recognition.

ER 3 (at the same age of 6-7) is introduced by: "Do you want to hear this one too?" At the annual carnival and rifle match she had been picked as "rifle queen." It had been wonderful.

Here again, recognition was experienced only through being someone very exceptional and being personally superior to all the others.

In ER 4 she is already 14 years old. In the Christmas play she is playing Mary. During the dress rehearsal her long veil is pulling a pile of hay after her. She was embarrassed.

Again, the girl plays the main role but is now greatly embarrassed. Nothing has been learned as yet of her emotional relationship to her family, except in memory one, where her father is not supposed to pay enough attention to her. She feels rejected by her family and can gain recognition and fame only by playing extraordinary top roles in the outside world.

In memory five she is 15 years old and belongs to a scout-leader-group. The boys are making fun of her because she blushes so easily. They think this is cute. She felt so embarrassed she could have killed them.

Again she belongs to the top group in the outside world and feels special through her blushing.

Had one stopped at this point, he could have assumed that she really had been an unloved, unimportant member of her family and had not felt that she belonged. Her present attitude as reflected by these memories is still: "I can not belong to any group unless I am the most important person in the group." But, according to prior observations, the assumption at this time is that she most probably is a woman who had been greatly pampered by all of her family during her early years and cannot bear remembering this indulging family climate because it does not fit into her self-pitying and striving for exceptionality life style. In most cases of unconscious avoidance of preschool memories, ER 6 and 7 would carry on the same theme. Here, however, a breakthrough is happening.

In ER 6 the subject suddenly remembered something that happened in her third year. She even recognizes her resistance to this early memory by stating: "This one I have kept secret from you." She remembered that she went to the beautiful home of her grandparents and her aunt. She stayed there until her sister was born. She then added that up to age twelve she was going home only on the weekends and that she had been much pampered at both places. Her sister then had been very jealous that she had not been allowed to stay with her grandparents as well.

The subject was a sixth semester student in Individual Psychology and probably therefore was able to face her pampered life style at this point.

In memory seven she was between eight and nine years old. "I remember how I had others wait on me. I sent a girl out to buy a notebook for me."

This memory underlines the demanding life style of a pampered child.

It seems that in this case, as in a number of parallel cases, her early life style was: indulgence, special care, and more than average attention paid to a pretty little girl by parents, grandparents, and aunt alike. The child developed an insatiable need for special attention which in adult life she still feels is due her. Her means to strive for this unattainable goal are largely exceptional performance. She is fighting an unbelievably hard and losing battle. Recognition of early childhood reality helps to re-experience love and warmth and social interest and can help a person to set more realistic goals.

4. It has been suggested that a person's ERs change, and the emotional coloring of the ERs change, in accordance with life style changes during therapy. In longitudinal studies, when ER recordings are made at intervals of six months or a year over a number of years, not only can general changes be noticed, but also specific problem areas not yet cleared up can be identified.

Back to the memories of the 47-year old school principal, which are recorded under Statement 2. Two years after he gave his first memories, the following ERs were recorded:

ER 1 (age 4). It was in the winter. Father and I were shoveling snow. Then we packed the snow down. After that we sat inside. Father smoked his pipe. It was very pleasant and relaxed.

This memory shows the person's development and maturity. In ER 1 — first set — he was sick, was unjustly confined, and was seeking companionship. Set 2 reflects an attitude of cooperation and satisfaction.

In ER 2 (age 2) father had found a dog and had brought him home to the boy. The dog became his most valued possession. He took a piece of rope, tied the dog and took him for a walk. "The neighbor child was jealous," he stated, "I didn't seem to understand."

The dog was something he could control, and this was what he remembered: leading him and making him follow. In the therapeutic session following this recording, too much manipulation was identified as the problem that he would still have to work on.

ER 3 (4 to 5 years old) is a variation of ER 2, Set 1: We played marbles in the yard. The holes had to be hard. My cousin did the fine work while I had to do the rough job because my cousin was not strong enough for that. Then we played. My cousin wanted new rules. The others did not want to play any more. That stopped it, and we were disappointed. First all had wanted to play and then came the disappointment.

The new aspect in this second set is that the subject, although a person of rather small size, feels stronger than his ten months older cousin. His self-image has changed in those two years. Self-worth feeling has increased. This ER of the second set tells of group activity even though it was in a certain way disappointing. Attempts at group cooperation were there, but the subject felt frustrated because he could neither manipulate the group nor assume successful leadership.

ER 4 (age 5). We, 15 to 20 boys, played in the street. The street was wet from rain. We had played soccer. The subject was happy and went home. There was a stranger in the house who had told mother that he had thrown mud on his jacket. The subject knew nothing about the mud incident and mother believed him. He was very happy that mother trusted him.

He felt unjustly treated in the first two ERs of Set 2. In ER 3, he felt extreme frustration and had a conflict with his brother in ER 4. In Set 2, twenty children are playing happily, which is a reflection of his much improved relationship with his co-workers. He feels trusted by his mother, which reflects an improved relationship with his wife.

ER 5 (4 years old). The little boy visits grandma. He was sick and stayed overnight. Mother's two youngest sisters, aged two and twelve, were also there. He relates: "I shared the bed with my 12-year old aunt. I snuggled up to her. This gave me such a beautiful feeling that at first I could not fall asleep. Then I fell asleep anyhow. It was too bad."

This trio shows a vastly improved relationship with his wife.

The progress the subject has made during the two-year interval is very clearly reflected in the second set of memories. The first ER set reflects an initial attitude of "I can belong only if I am more miserable and more unjustly treated than the others." To overcome this attitude — still in the first set — he attempts courageous acts such as sticking a fork into his brother, teaching himself to swim, and scaring his mother to death. This leads to the development of being a hero, defending the underdog, and rescuing the drowning. In Set No. 2 a much more cooperative life style is showing. He still is coping with the problem of control but has come a long way towards developing communal feelings and towards a much more equal and affectionate relationship with his wife.

5. Instant attitudinal changes are reflected in changed early recollections.

In one of the psychological life style analysis classes, a student (in his early forties) volunteered to be "the case." He had brought a special pillow along, probably to elevate himself and make his performance more impressive. He said that he had participated in many California groups of one



kind or another (mostly of the “fad” variety). He had taken them very seriously. He was also familiar with the production of his Alpha brain waves. His life history reflected a subjective memory of extreme suffering. He claimed to have been born in a rural U.S. southern state to an unwed mother, sired by an unknown father, “dumped” at birth in an orphanage, picked up from it by a “paranoid” grandmother (not related to him), and to having been raised and exploited by her. This “paranoid” grandmother later took in also his mother and his mother’s later husband. He recalled having been sent out into the streets by “those people” to sell candy bars so that they could buy groceries. This sad story he had told in all his previous groups and thus had achieved his specific goal of personal superiority by having everybody feel extremely sorry for him. What a tremendously great guy he would be had he not had to suffer from all those tragic circumstances! Making himself so miserable was a high price to pay for the attainment of his goal.

In his ER 1 (age 1) he stated: I was standing in my crib, hanging on to the bars, jumping up and down, crying desperately for water. It was very hot. My stepfather came but, instead of bringing me water, he brutally beat me with a brush.

Further recollections expressed a similar “poor me” life style aspect. He was confronted with his goal to be very special and a superior “showman.” Recommendations for change were made and a protocol of the class session was recorded.

One week later, the protocol was read and the student was asked about his thoughts and feelings concerning the last week’s session. He started retelling his sad story but was stopped, and it was suggested that his early life could not have been all that bad, that the “grandmother” must have had some kindness in her heart to take into her home an abandoned infant and later the infant’s mother and stepfather, and that possibly his mother and “grandmother” had competed for his favors and had indulged and spoiled him. The subject then showed a clear recognition reflex and began to substantiate this hypothesis, seeing his early life now in a completely new light. At this point he was again asked to tell his first memory. He stated that he had told it already and that everybody in the group knew it. Upon insistence though he produced the following:

ER 1 (age 1). I was in my crib, standing, holding on to the bars, and jumping up and down happily.

The whole class recognized the change and reacted with amusement. The student wondered what was going on. When told of the difference between these two memories, he denied it and could be convinced only by having reread the previous week’s recording, which he had heard just a little earlier.

This incident shows the great sensitivity of ERs in reflecting even temporary attitudinal changes.

Another example of ER changes is the case of a 49-year old medical consultant, married, with three teen-age children. He presented his case in an Adlerian Psychotherapeutic Marathon. He remembered the following:

(Age 3) It was back home, at the northern coast of Germany. My father was a veterinarian. I was placed in a black crib, the feeling was bad. Then he added: I was sad because I did not like the countryside there and liked it much better with my grandparents in the mountains.

After one hour of concentrated therapeutic group work, in which he had temporarily succeeded in changing his negative attitude toward his parents and had recognized the indulgence he had experienced from his grandparents, he was asked to tell his earliest recollections again. He told the following:

I was three years old and put to bed at my grandparents' house in the mountains. The crib was brown. I felt very good because I was the center of attention.

The negative feelings about his parents were no longer dominant. Not only the countryside but even the color of the crib had changed, in a pleasant way. Obviously, the subject had not changed his pampered life style. (It takes years to change a life style.) But for the moment he had changed his negative blaming attitude toward his parents and the world in general.

6. It may be of considerable therapeutic value to show the patient that his line of development, as reflected in his first seven ERs, points toward increasing maturity and social interest.

The patient can be shown that he is engaged in finding his true self, which may be better than he had thought it to be. Also the pointing out of growing social interest and progress in cooperation is a genuine encouragement and of prime importance in any therapeutic work.

This maturation trend, however slightly it may be reflected in the early recollection series, is helpful also in establishing a cooperative and socially equal relationship between therapist and patient and counselor and counselee. An early resistance, known as transference in other schools of psychology, can be reduced or eliminated, if the patient is able to recognize in his early memory reflections that he already has started work on his problems; and therewith the therapist needs not be the Almighty. He has already started to change, and further changes will come about through his and the therapist's cooperative endeavor.

It is advisable to record the seven first recollections as early as possible in the diagnostic therapeutic session in order to fixate the initial emotional state

of the patient. ER recordings can then be repeated at three months, six months, and twelve months intervals to indicate emotional growth or therapeutic progress.

It is recommended that interpretation of ERs not begin during the recording time. However, if the last two recollections indicate positive development, this should be pointed out to the patient, as stated above under Point 6.

A tentative life style analysis may start after the first seven memories are recorded, and its results can be communicated to the patient if he can handle them at this time. As a rule, this procedure is followed mostly in therapy groups and in marathons, where mini-life style analyses are done for less severe cases. In individual therapy, and especially with the very neurotic or psychotic patients, the therapist usually keeps his insights to himself until much later and proceeds with further aspects of life style analysis.

Themes running through early recollections, such as repeated references to "riding in the back seat," "being the chosen one," or "sitting in elevated places" lend themselves as excellent mirrors reflecting the patient's present attitudes and intentions.

The interpretation of early recollections can not be taken lightly. Mistakes can easily be made before one has the total life style picture. ER interpretation should be acceptable to the patient and evaluated and tested over and over again by further diagnostic material.

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