

# ***Reflecting As If:***

***A Brief, Integrative, Encouragement-Focused  
Counseling Process***

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**ONSAP 2016**

# Adlerian and *Constructive* Therapies: Common Ground

Adlerian psychology and psychotherapy contains many tenets that resonate with those from constructivist and social constructionist perspectives.

- Epistemology and social embedded and relationally distributed nature of human knowledge
- Clinical practice characteristics: Relationship focused, optimistic and present/future oriented, and emphasizing clients' strengths, assists and abilities
- Many interventions discussed in the constructive therapy literature are either similar to or congruent with ones used in Adlerian therapy.

Therefore, it is not surprising to see significant opportunities for technical integration between the two.

# As If and Acting As If

One very specific area of common ground: The value in using the “as if” quality of human experience in counseling and psychotherapy.

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 *restory* oppressive aspects of his or her personal metanarrative (or *style of life*, in Adlerian parlance).

# Expanding the Acting 'As If' Technique: *Reflecting As If*

*Acting As If*: The traditional approach

*Reflecting As If (RAI)*: An integration of Adlerian and constructive counseling and psychotherapy ideas.

The integrative *RAI 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.

# Expanding the Acting 'As If' Technique: *Reflecting As If*

The **RAI** process has three phases:

**Phase One** uses reflective questions to access the creativity and imagination of clients.

In **Phase Two** the client and therapist co-construct an action plan based on the clients' reflective thinking.

In **the final phase**, clients implement the *as if* behaviors and subsequently dialogue about their enactment experience with the therapist.

# *Reflecting As If*

## *RAI Phase One*

The therapist uses reflective questions such as:

- 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?

# Reflecting As If

## *RAI Phase Two*

After the reflective questioning phase of the process (phase one), the client and counselor 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.



General to specific

Before moving on, the client and counselor do a *plausibility check* or the ‘as if’ behaviors.

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.

# *Reflecting As If*

## *RAI Phase Three*

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 courageously engage the more difficult tasks on their list is usually stronger.

# *Reflecting As If*

## *RAI Phase Three - II*

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.

Some erroneously assume that Adlerian therapy asserts that *insight* always precedes behavior change. However, Adlerians often use action-oriented procedures—such as acting ‘as if’ and RAI—in order to facilitate perceptual alternatives. The Adlerian therapeutic process, like that of many constructive therapies, seeks to change clients’ “doing,” “viewing,” and invoke their strengths, assets, and abilities.

# *Reflecting As If*

## *RAI Phase Three - III*

As the client attempts the more difficult tasks on his or her as if behavior list, it is crucial that the therapist use ***encouragement*** to help him or her 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.

Although encouragement is crucial all through the counseling process, it is particularly important in phase three. Let me briefly clarify my understanding of the use Adlerian encouragement in the RAI process

# *Encouragement*

- Encouragement is often misunderstood as merely an Adlerian “technique.” Actually encouragement is an *attitude* and *way of being* with others.
- Adlerians consider encouragement a crucial aspect of human growth and development. This is especially true regarding counseling. Adlerians view counseling as a process of encouragement.
- Dreikurs noted the essential necessity of encouragement in psychotherapy. He stated that presenting problems are “based on discouragement” and without “encouragement, without having faith in himself restored, [the client] cannot see the possibility of doing or functioning better.”
- Adler once asked a client what he thought made the difference in his successful experience in therapy. The client replied: “That’s quite simple. I had lost all courage to live. In our consultations I found it again.”

# *The Process of Encouragement*

- Encouragement is a vital element in every phase of counseling.
  - Relationship: Cooperative, collaborative, egalitarian, optimistic, and respectful.
  - Assessment and Facilitating Insight: Illuminating strengths helping clients understand their power to choose and change.
  - Reorientation: Promoting change by stimulating the client's courage to change.

# *The Skills of Encouragement*

- Accepting clients unconditionally and without judgment.
- Demonstrating concern for clients through active listening, respect, and empathy;
- Focusing on clients' strengths, assets, and abilities (including identifying and drawing upon past successes) and communicating confidence in the same.
- Helping clients distinguish between what they do and who they are (deed vs. doer);
- Focusing on clients' efforts and progress;
- Communicating affirmation and appreciation to clients;
- Helping clients generate perceptual alternatives for discouraging fictional beliefs and oppressive narratives;
- Helping clients see the humor in life experiences. (Watts & Pietrzak, 2000)

# Using Imaginary Reflecting Teams in the RAI Process – I

When immersed in difficult situations, some clients have difficulty with the RAI process. They struggle to see beyond the “problem” and are unable to create perceptual alternatives and alternative behaviors. These clients need help *stepping out* or *stepping away* from problems so that they may create a place for reflection, and consequently, develop preferred alternative meanings. The use of *imaginary reflecting teams* can be one way to help clients step out or away from the problems and create dialogic space for reflecting as if.

# Using Imaginary Reflecting Teams in the RAI Process – II

When clients have difficulty responding to reflective questions, a can invite imaginary team members into the session.

To begin using imaginary team members in session, the therapist asks the client the following: “Think of one or more persons you respect and view as wise.” The client and therapist then create a list of team members. To amplify the team member imagery, the therapist may provide chairs for each team member, similar to the use of an empty chair in Gestalt therapy. Therapists may choose to put nametags on the chairs for identification purposes (Watts & Trusty, 2003).

# Using Imaginary Reflecting Teams in the RAI Process – III

Once the team is created, the counselor may call on team members for assistance by asking clients questions from narrative and solution-focused therapies such as:

- Suppose you are talking to this person/couple in the future after you've made significant progress in overcoming the problem. What changes will [he or she] say are evident?
- What, specifically, will [he or she] say is different about you?
- What specific steps would [he or she] identify that you took to make this significant change? [Future Questions]
- What suggestions might [he or she] make for responding constructively to the problem? [Suggestion Question]
- What might [he or she] say you do when anger attacks you? [Externalizing Question]

# Using Imaginary Reflecting Teams in the RAI Process – IV

- What would [he or she] describe times when the problem isn't a problem for you? [Exception Question]
- How would [he or she] describe what you do when you are acting in ways that you prefer? [Unique Outcome Question]

*Follow up questions for exception and unique outcome questions:*

- How would [he or she] explain your ability to accomplish such this great success? [Accomplishment/Coping Question]
- How will he or she know when you two are starting to move in the direction you both want to go as a couple? [Initial Movement Question].

West, J. D., Watts, R. E., Trepal, H. C., Wester, K. L., & Lewis, T. F. (2001). Opening space for reflection: A postmodern consideration. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 9, 431-437.

# Using Imaginary Reflecting Teams in the RAI Process – V

After the “Team” has been “heard,” the therapist can proceed to **Phase 2** of the RAI process and help the client develop a list of “as if” behaviors and rate them in terms of difficulty. Again, if clients are having difficulty ranking the behaviors, the therapist may invite imaginary team members to help the client with the ranking process.

After the behaviors have been ranked, the acting “as if” may begin.

# Using Imaginary Reflecting Teams in the RAI Process – VI

In the next (and subsequent sessions), the client and therapist discuss the enactment of the “as if” behaviors selected for that week and any resulting perceptual alternatives or enactment difficulties. Imaginary team members may be invited in to discuss areas of improvement or areas for growth. The types of questions offered as examples in Phase One are easily adapted for use in this phase of the process.

As the client attempts the more difficult tasks, imaginary team members can be invited to positively reflect on the efforts and forward movement, and provide encouragement when progress moves slower.

# Using RAI in Supervision

- Reflecting As If (RAI) in Supervision
  - If you were acting as if you were the counselor you want to be, what would you be doing with clients” OR
  - If you were acting as if you were the counselor you want to be with this client, what would you do (or what would you have done) differently?
  - If I were watching a video of you in session, what would be different? What would you want to do more of? Less of?
  - Think of a counselor you respect and trust. What would he or she say? (Imaginary Reflecting Team)
  - What would be some initial indicators that demonstrate you are headed in the direction you want with your client?
- Savor clinical successes “small victories”
  - Clinical successes are required each week from the supervisee for each client

# Applications of RAI

Individuals\*

Couples Counseling\*

Clients who Bully Others\*

Non-Suicidal Self-Injuring Clients\*

Using Children's Drawings in the RAI Process\*

Using Imaginary Reflecting Teams in the RAI Process\*

Group Work

Supervision

Mentoring

Coaching & Leadership

Using Sandtray in the RAI Process

## *Evidence-Base for RAI*

John and Rita Sommers-Flannagan (2012), in the new edition of their excellent theory text, recently reviewed my writings on RAI. They offered the following evaluation:

“The RAI procedure is simple and straightforward. It’s also a good example of not only the theoretical compatibility of Adlerian approaches, but also of their empirical base. Specifically, RAI employs several evidence-based techniques, including (a) collaborative goal-setting; (b) collaborative brainstorming as a step in problem-solving; (c) a focus on concrete and measurable behaviors; and (d) concrete behavioral planning” (pp. 102-103).