

Reflecting As If: An Encouragement-Focused Brief Counseling Process

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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 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.

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 the Adlerian understanding of encouragement.

Encouragement

Encouragement is often misunderstood as merely an Adlerian “technique.” Actually encouragement is a way of being with others and Adlerians view counseling as a process of encouragement. Encouragement tactics include:

- 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.

Encouragement

- 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 therapist 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 Children's Drawings in the RAI Process

How to Use Drawings with Reflecting “As If”

Key concepts of utilizing the acting “as if” technique with children include the counselor being encouraging, empathetic, understanding and the counselor must emphasize to the client that they are simply pretending, or only acting (Watts & Garza, 2008).

Using Children's Drawings in the RAI Process – II

The 3 Steps of Using “As If” Drawings with Children

Step 1: The counselor asks the child to draw a picture based on 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 movie of your life, what would be different?”

Depending on the child’s age, the counselor may need to simplify the questions in order to facilitate the child’s understanding of what to do.

Using Children's Drawings in the RAI Process – III

The 3 Steps of Using “As If” Drawings with Children

Step 2: Once the child has finished the completed initial drawing, then the counselor will co-construct an “as if” list of behaviors with the child. Children may be more comfortable drawing the list of behaviors instead of verbally telling the counselor.

After completing the list the child should rank the behaviors from the “easiest to do” to the “hardest to do”.

(Thermometer). When the child has ranked these behaviors the counselor will ask him or her to pick the easiest two and enact the behaviors prior to the next session.

Using Children's Drawings in the RAI Process – IV

The 3 Steps of Using “As If” Drawings with Children

Step 3: The final step allows the child the opportunity to explore with the counselor the process of acting “as if” and again children may be more comfortable using drawings to discuss how the enactment attempts went.

It is key for counselor and parents to be encouraging and to frame success in terms of the child’s effort. Even small attempts are movement in a positive direction.

Taking a CAB in the RAI Process

Love and Family

Present

Preferred

Relationships

Cognition

Affect

Behavior

Friends and Society

Cognition

Affect

Behavior

Taking a CAB for in the RAI Process - II

Work or School

Present

Preferred

Cognition

Affect

Behavior

Self

Cognition

Affect

Behavior

Spirituality

Cognition

Affect

Behavior

Evidence-Based

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.

Using RAI in Group Work

Using RAI in Supervision

Reflecting As If Readings

Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Sommers-Flanagan, R. (2012). *Counseling and psychotherapy theories in context and practice: Skills, strategies, and techniques*. New York, NY: Wiley.

Watts, R. E. (2003). Reflecting “as if”: An integrative process in couples counseling. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 11, 73-75.

Watts, R. E., & Garza, Y. (2008). Using children’s drawings to facilitate the acting “as if” procedure. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 64, 113-118.

Watts, R. E., Peluso, P. R., & Lewis, T. L. (2005). Expanding the acting as if technique: An Adlerian/constructive integration. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 61, 380-387.

Watts, R. E., & Trusty, J. (2003). Using imaginary team members in reflecting “as if.” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 16, 335-340.

If you send an email request, I will be glad to forward you any of my RAI articles listed above.

ACA “Reflecting As If” Podcast:

<http://www.counseling.org/Sub/Podcasts/HT026.mp3>

Adlerian and Constructive

Carlson, J., Watts, R. E., & Maniacci, M. (2006). *Adlerian therapy: Theory and practice*. Washington, D.C.: APA.

Watts, R. E. (2003). Adlerian therapy as a relational constructivist approach. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 11, 139-147.

Watts, R.E., & Critelli, J. (1997). Roots of contemporary cognitive theories in the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: A review. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 11, 147-156.

Watts, R.E., & Phillips, K.A. (2004). Adlerian psychology and psychotherapy: A relational constructivist approach. In J. D. Raskin & S. Bridges (Eds.), *Studies in meaning: Exploring constructivist psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 267-289). New York: Pace University Press.

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.

Watts, R.E., & Shulman, B.H. (2003). Integrating Adlerian and constructive psychotherapies: An Adlerian perspective. In R. E. Watts (Ed.), *Adlerian, cognitive and constructivist theories of counseling and psychotherapy: An integrative dialogue* (pp. 9-37). New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Watts, R. E., Williamson, J., & Williamson, D. (2004). Adlerian psychology: A relational constructivist approach. *Adlerian Yearbook: 2004* (pp. 7-31). London: Adlerian Society (UK) and Institute for Individual Psychology.

Using RAI: Two Case Studies

Case Study #1 – I

Lynn and Ralph were a couple in their mid-30s. They had been married for two years following three years of difficult courtship. Lynn cited a lack of desire for her husband, saying, “He’s just not a good husband.” Furthermore, she reported that they both had jobs but she was expected to do all the housework while Ralph often stayed late at work.

Ralph agreed that he was “not the perfect husband.” The therapist, seeing this as an excuse, reframed the comment and Ralph admitted that “he could be better.” However he didn’t know how to be better. At this point, Lynn interrupted and recited a list of things that she had asked him to do. The therapist then introduced the *Reflecting As If* Process to help the situation.

Using RAI: Two Case Studies

Case Study #1 – II

In **Phase 1**, the therapist asked reflective questions to both Ralph and Lynn. Lynn wanted to do more things together. When asked what a “better” husband would look like, Ralph suggested that he would come home as early as he could and also ask Lynn out for dinner with clients. Also, using the character of Paul from *Mad About You*, Ralph suggested that being attentive, affectionate, and doing things together were aspects of being a “better” husband.

Using RAI: Two Case Studies

Case Study #1 – III

In **Phase 2**, the couple and the therapist came up with a list of behaviors Ralph could do to be a “better” husband. Examples included calling Lynn at least twice a day, and increasing the amount of time they spent together.

Using RAI: Two Case Studies

Case Study #1 – IV

In **Phase 3**, the couple reported feeling closer together, though Lynn also had some more feelings of disillusionment. Also, they were able to show what was working and what was not working. Finally, the therapist worked with Lynn on her views of marriage, and her idealized views of her distant father that gave her a need for connection and a desire to not be lonely.

Watts, R. E., Peluso, P. R., & Lewis, T. L. (2005). Expanding the acting as if technique: An Adlerian/constructive integration. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 61, 380-387.

Using RAI: Two Case Studies

Case Study #2 – I

Billie and Tom came in because of increasing conflict in their marriage. At the end of the first session, after the intake procedure and informed consent, the couple was handed a copy of three reflective questions:

- 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?

Using RAI: Two Case Studies

Case Study #2 – II

The couple was asked to answer the questions individually over the next week and bring their responses to the next session. The answers were discussed in the next session and they both indicated they had needs that were not being met.

To help them work on meeting the needs of the other, they were each asked to create a list of five behaviors that would help in the meeting of needs. The lists were discussed and ranked in terms of difficulty.

Two of the least difficult behaviors were then selected for practice in the coming week. For instance, Tom chose to tell Billie he loved her at least once a day, and Billie chose to take a break when angry before talking to Tom.

Using RAI: Two Case Studies

Case Study #2 – III

In the next session the behaviors they chose to practice were discussed. They both suggested there was some difficulty at first, but they both could sense an improvement in the relationship. They began to have hope because they saw the other working to better the relationship. An expanded list of behaviors was then developed and the couple was asked to add two more behaviors to practice in the coming week.

Using RAI: Two Case Studies

Case Study #2 – IV

For the last five sessions this pattern continued, with more behaviors being added for practice. Some of the behaviors were more difficult to implement, and some weeks the couple chose to only implement one at a time. However, they showed an ability to evaluate their relationship and the work being done without being hostile, which was the presenting complaint.

Watts, R. E. (2003). Reflecting “as if”: An integrative process in couples counseling. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 11, 73-75.