

## An Application of Adlerian Principles to Problems of Control in Marriage

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As is clear to the student of Adler, all behavior is viewed as goal-directed. When we ask why an individual has acted in a given way, we are seeking not the preceding cause of his behavior, but rather its purpose. Although the specific purpose is different for each individual, in that particular immediate results are sought, the basic underlying purpose is the same in all cases.

As the Ansbachers have stated the principle,

There is one basic dynamic force behind all human activity, a striving from a felt minus situation towards a plus situation, from a feeling of inferiority towards superiority, perfection, totality. (Alfred Adler, 1964, p. 1).

Adler said that he "began to see clearly in every psychological phenomenon the striving for superiority." (Alfred Adler, 1964, p. 103) Furthermore, ". . . the striving for superiority is common to all men," (Alfred Adler, 1964, p. 255) and it "never ceases." (Alfred Adler, 1969, p. 28) Adler later clarified what he meant by the "striving for superiority" in this manner:

The striving of each actively moving individual is towards overcoming, not towards power. Striving for power, for personal power, represents only one of a thousand types, all of which seek perfection, a security-giving plus situation. (Alfred Adler, 1964, p. 114)

I think, nonetheless, that for many, if not most persons, and certainly for those with "problems," the striving to overcome translates itself easily and immediately into a quest for power. (I do not intend to suggest that this quest for power is usually or even often in the conscious awareness of the individual). I would further suggest that in the area of interpersonal relationships, the issue of superiority/power appears in even sharper relief when it is labeled "control," the controlling role providing the sense of being in the plus situation.

Although a wide variety of interpersonal relationships exists, my concern is restricted herein to a single, intense, and consciously chosen

type of relationship; namely, marriage. I will assume agreement on the point that ours is a society which produces individuals generally ill-equipped for the tasks -- especially cooperation and caring -- of marriage. Thus I see a situation in which the innate human striving to overcome (which more often than not leads to a desire to be in control in interpersonal relations) placed in the context of an impersonal, alienating society, leads to marriages in which control becomes a major issue. Stated somewhat differently, the postulate is as follows: basic issue to be resolved in marriage is that of control, and upon its resolution can rest the success or failure of the relationship.

It is not my intention to investigate underlying causes which have led marital partners to adopt a particular resolution of this issue, nor to delve into the subtleties of reward each achieves as a result of his/her behavior, nor to impose my own value concept of what constitutes a "good" or "bad" marriage. Rather, I wish only to classify and describe what I see as the behavioral manifestations of the ways in which the issue of control is being dealt with.

As I see it, there are six basic ways in which the issue of control in a marriage is dealt with:

1. one controls, one acquiesces
2. one controls, one fights
3. both seek to control
4. neither relinquishes control
5. both seek to relinquish control
6. both work together to see how and how much control to relinquish

### **1. One Controls, One Acquiesces**

This is probably the most common type of marital relationship to be found at the present time, and it appears in several variations (its prevalence may, however, lessen as the result of changing mores and life styles). Because of our societal orientation, this type usually involves a controlling husband and an acquiescing wife. In its most benign manifestations, the control is non-coercive and non-obtrusive, both parties apparently quite happily accepting the situation. In other cases, the control is exercised in a more obvious, sometimes even dictatorial, manner with varying degrees of discomfort evidenced by the wife. An extreme manifestation on the one controlling-one acquiescing relationship is the shrewish wife-henpecked husband syndrome, where the husband rather slavishly obeys his wife's desires.

It needs to be pointed out, however, that the real control in a marriage is not necessarily that which it may first appear to be. An obvious example of this type of situation is one wherein the dependent, apparently controlled wife actually exercises virtually complete control through her dependence and apparent inability to make decisions. A further variation on the basic relational type is the prototypal Italian family, where the husband is the apparently dominant, even domineering, figure but where the wife, although quiet and outwardly deferential, is in reality very much in control of the situation.

## **2. One Controls, One Fights**

The relationship in which one party controls and the other fights being controlled may appear to be only a variation on the previously noted situation where one party controls and the other evidences some discomfort with the situation. In reality, however, it is a difference of kind, not merely of degree. For in the first situation, the discomfort does not result in any concerted attempt to alter the relationship or in Eric Berne's terms to break the contract. In the control-fight relationship, however, the person fighting being controlled is genuinely unhappy with the situation and is often in a state of rebellion against it. This marriage is generally characterized by a great deal of tension and acrimony.

## **3. Both Seek to Control**

This is one step beyond the previous type because here each partner in the marriage is determined to be in control; thus, neither is willing to relinquish any power to the other. Neither is content with being his/her own master but is constantly attempting to subjugate the other to his/her will.

The manifestations of this type of relationship are myriad: the one in which there occurs continual bitter fighting, including yelling and, sometimes, physical abuse, the one in which the expression of anger is restricted either to the cold shoulder or to nasty sarcasm and backbiting; the one in which one party - more often than not the husband - maintains the latent threat of aberrant behavior (e.g., drunken sprees); and others.

## **4. Neither Relinquishes Control**

This type of relationship has a number of variations some of which lead to a degree of wonder as to why the marriage was entered into, since the parties appear to have so little of the intimacy usually thought to be a goal of marriage. In one variation, the husband and wife have virtually separate existences, both occupational and social (e.g., meetings, clubs or sports with groups of the same sex, although the wife's sphere of activity is often restricted to home and children). By spending very little time with each other and by engaging primarily in mutually exclusive acti-

vities, both parties are able to avoid the threat of intimacy and to maintain control of themselves and hence the relationship as it applies to them.

Another variation on this basic relationship might be labeled more "dangerous" to the partners since it involves a great deal of proximity and shared experiences (including concern with child rearing), with the necessity always being to maintain control over one's emotions so as to avoid the possibility of a degree of intimacy which might threaten the need for control. One way in which the safeguards can be maintained is for the parties to interact from their parental roles, making sure not to attempt true husband-wife interaction.

### **5. Both Seek to Relinquish Control**

This type of relationship generally results from mistaken perceptions by the partners -- probably because they were so eager to find someone to whom they could give up the control and responsibility for self. It reflects, as indicated, the desire of both parties to have the other control the marriage. In its more obvious form, the relationship is characterized by a great deal of indecision and, often, inactivity. Under the normal pressures of life, one of the partners may -- probably resentfully -- be forced into a controlling role with the "victorious" relinquisher heaving a sigh of relief.

### **6. Both Work Together to See How and How Much Control to Relinquish**

The objective here is a fully giving and sharing relationship, one in which each party is interested in maintaining his/her own independent, being while working to help the other partner retain his/her own independence in an atmosphere of trust and reliance, free from control and manipulation. It is an extremely difficult relationship for most persons to achieve since it involves existence in that potentially frightening area of openness and vulnerability which results from relinquishing control and trusting in another person.

Although there is, as previously indicated, no attempt to place value judgements on the types of relationships described, there are certain obvious ways in which Adlerian principles are applicable to, and help to explain, them. Basically, of course the individuals who seek control of others in marriage, whether through coercion or through manipulation, are attempting to compensate, through this power, for their feeling of inferiority. They are able to move into what they perceive as a plus position by subjugating another to their will. But their superiority is hollow for it results from the denigrating of another, rather than from their own positive achievements; thus, they become locked into their striving for control since to give it up would be to lose their escape from felt inferiority. In such a situation with either or both striving for control, it is clear that there can be little, if any, of the social interest -- the caring for and giving to another -- that Adler so accurately described as the sine qua non of

healthy living. Only in the type of relationship in which neither individual seeks to control the other, and where together the two parties work to maintain the healthy interdependence of two independent beings, can there be said to be true social interest and, hence, a healthy atmosphere where the continued growth and development of the two partners is possible.

The issue of control in a marriage and the ways in which it is dealt with cannot provide the therapist with ready-made analyses of, or solutions to, marital problems, but it can provide an additional tool for clarifying the nature of the problems, the rewards each partner is achieving through his/her behavior, and the underlying causes of this behavior.

#### References

Adler, Alfred. *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*, ed. H. L. Ansbacher and R. R. Ansbacher. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

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#### Book Review

#### **Support Systems and Community Mental Health**

*Gerald Caplan*  
*Behavioral Publications, 72 Fifth Ave., New York, NY*

*Support Systems and Community Mental Health* presents a new conceptual model of support systems which should be helpful to the health-promoting forces at both the person-to-person and social level.

Dr. Gerald Caplan, an originator in the community psychiatry movement, brings his 20 years of experience and his significant insights together in this collection of previously unpublished papers. His discussions of population-oriented preventive psychiatry are based on clinical and experimental research and are meant to aid people in mastering the challenges and strains of their lives. These lectures make complex matters readily understandable through applications to daily practice.

The importance of structuring cognitive and emotional supports for people in difficulty is emphasized. This book will be valuable not only to community mental health specialists, but other professional and non-professional care-givers as well.