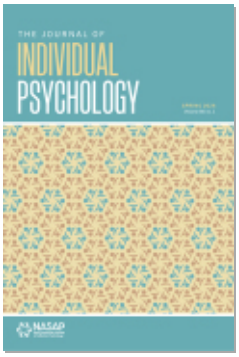
Past, Present, and Future Movement in Early Recollection Work

Mia Levitt-Frank



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ABSTRACT: This article offers a view of working with early recollections (ERs) in therapy while incorporating encouragement, reconstruction, and movement between the past, present, and future. Adler saw ERs as stories representing individuals' "life stories," meaning their lifestyles (personalities). As metaphoric narratives, ERs also reflect current experiences and emotions. Working with ERs in therapy provides the therapist and client with opportunities for encouragement, growth, and awareness. Engaging with ERs invites varied, creative paths for development and insight. They may be used as an ongoing and interactive tool for assessment and therapeutic interventions. This article presents a process of moving from the past to the present and back to the past by reconstructing an ER. Using the client's wisdom from the present in the reconstruction opens a significant window to future change and allows the client to expand their perceptions.

KEYWORDS: early recollection, narrative, metaphor, reconstruction, therapy

Adler (1931) considered early recollections (ERs) one of the most prominent discoveries of Individual Psychology. He claimed, "Among all psychic expressions, some of the most revealing are individuals' memories," and he added that memories represent an individual's life story:

> [Individuals'] memories are the reminders they carry with them of their own limitations and of the meaning of events. There are no chance memories. . . . Memories represent their life story, a story they repeat to themselves for warmth or comfort, to keep them concentrated on their goal, or to prepare them, by means of past experiences, to meet the future with a tried and tested approach. (p. 70)

Individuals' stories are narratives that define their present and future selves (Fivush, 2017). Their ERs are narratives expressing their *lifestyles* (the Adlerian term for personality) relating to the past, present, and future (Adler, 1931; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006; Sarig, 2016). Lifestyle includes an individual's convictions about life, including the self-concept, self-ideal, worldview, and ethics (Mosak & Di Petro, 2006). Additionally, ERs are metaphoric projections for current experiences and emotions (Clark, 2002; Kopp, 1995; Kopp & Dinkmeyer, 1981) and contribute to

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therapy because they yield significant clinical material (Shifron, 2020). They reflect individuals' core concepts about themselves, others, and the world, including their creative strengths and resources (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006; Shifron, 2020). Therefore, they enable working with clients' cognitions and provide meaningful encouragement in therapy. The reconstruction of an ER (Kopp, 1995; Shifron, 2020) invites cognitive and emotional shifting for the client.

This article demonstrates incorporating ERs when working with a client, emphasizing encouragement and reconstruction as significant interventions that enable the possibility of change. Additionally, the article emphasizes the value of back-and-forth movement between past, present, and future when working with an ER in a therapeutic conversation and describes how the ER introduction contributes to the temporal continuity of the self and lifestyle. The article reviews ERs and ERs as narratives aligned with individual identity and core lifestyle convictions, followed by a description of an intervention working with an ER in conversation with a participant in a workshop.

This participant granted permission to share this description in the article. She is the youngest of three sisters. Her father died a few weeks before the workshop, and ever since she had been preoccupied with a specific ER. An emotional experience usually triggers an ER (Kopp, 1995), and her specific ER triggered the conversation. The participant developed new insight through encouragement and reconstruction of the ER, moving between the past, present, and future. This movement included incorporating acquired knowledge from the present in reconstructing the ER, affecting future thinking. Through this demonstration, I wish to contribute to the literature on ERs and therapy and encourage practitioners to approach ER work with clients in varied and creative ways.

EARLY RECOLLECTIONS

An ER is a story of a specific event through the age of about 10 years that the individual remembers and can visualize and lacks historical relevance (Last, 1997; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). Before that age, most children do not have chronological memory, meaning they do not remember sequences of events accurately. Adults adjust their ERs by projecting information and emotions onto their memories (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). Adler claimed that ERs represent one's life story (Adler, 1931). ERs are subjective stories individuals select according to their perspectives; they are metaphoric narratives for individuals' subjective concepts about themselves, others, and the world, reflecting current experiences and emotions (Clark, 2002; Sarig, 2016; Shifron, 2020).

Events take on human shape and meaning in narratives through subjective evaluations of situations, interactions, and relationships (Fivush & Haden, 2003). A narrative framework offers a theoretical background for ERs compatible with the "narrative turn" that affects many disciplines, including literature, sociology, and psychology (Androutsopoulou, 2013; Sarig, 2016).

A *narrative* is an idea we present through a story (Sarig, 2016), composed of a "unique sequence of events, mental states and happenings" (Bruner, 1990, p. 43). Individuals' stories define who they are and will become (Fivush, 2017). Sarig (2016) claimed that Adler defined ERs as narratives (using the terms *story* and *autobiography*) decades before the term *narrative* became well established. She added that the introductions to some ERs provide context for the story. Levitt-Frank and Shoshana (2021, 2022) found that most ERs begin with an introduction; individuals create this context to set themselves in time and place as part of a continuity of the self. Some introductions are short, others longer, and some clearly delineate the transition between the introduction and the plot.

Sarig (2016) referred to ERs as *metaphoric narratives*. By using this term, Sarig claimed that an ER represents not only core beliefs and aspects of personality (narrative) but also "the individual's current and changing situation in the present" (metaphor; Sarig, 2016, p. 226). Emphasizing the role of narrative in human cognition, Fivush and Haden (2003) claimed that self and memory intertwine by constructing stories about one's life. Individuals create an identity that makes sense as they select the aspects of their experience to which they relate (McAdams, 2003). This means that individuals choose what to remember.

From a plethora of childhood experiences, individuals choose to remember those representing their individuality and core concepts about themselves, others, and life (Dreikurs, 1973; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). According to Adler (1931), human beings "live in the realm of meanings" and seek to make meaning of reality (p. 15). ERs fulfill the function of preserving a coherent sense of self (Bluck, 2003). Individuals establish their uniqueness through this "self-making" (Bruner, 2003) and tend to keep certain memories within reach for when they are needed. Selecting which ERs to remember is part of the mechanism for making meaning of oneself and life and creating and preserving one's sense of self and uniqueness. Various approaches to ERs focus on the latent or overt content of memories (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). Two main perspectives on ERs regard them as *concealing* or *revealing* (Langs et al., 1960). Freud regarded screen memories as *concealing* hidden traumatic content. Adler

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emphasized the importance of the ERs' observable content, seeing them as *revealing* personality (Ansbacher, 1947; Clark, 2002; Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982; Last & Bruhn, 1983; Sarig, 2016).

Ego psychology focuses on the ER's overt content and emphasizes memories' adaptive function. Mayman (1968) claimed that individuals unconsciously choose and construct ERs according to their thought and behavior patterns (Fowler et al., 2000). A functionalist approach examines memories by attempting to understand why individuals recall certain things and the role of memories in one's life (Bluck, 2003). Cognitive-perceptual theory understands ERs as expressions of individuals' current values and attitudes, reminding them of what is most significant for themselves developmentally (Bruhn, 1992). Mosak (1969) reviewed four psychoanalytically oriented research studies by Langs et al. (1960) and claimed that the results suggested that ERs reflect and foresee individuals' personalities. Adlerian theory posits that ERs are unconsciously created fictions in which the individual's personality tendencies and behavior guidelines are expressed (Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982; Papanek, 1972; Schrecker, 1973).

ERs and Individual Psychology

According to Individual Psychology, ERs represent individuals' core concepts about themselves, others, and life, including their perceptions, resources, needs, and desires. Additionally, ERs reflect individuals' current experiences and emotions (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006; Shifron, 2020). ERs correspond with basic Individual Psychology ideas, including lifestyle, subjectivity, and choice. According to Adler (1931), ERs reveal lifestyle in its "simplest expression" (p. 72). By the age of about 5 years, children consolidate subjective conceptions of what to expect from others, the world, and themselves and adopt a unified behavior pattern (Adler, 1931). *Lifestyle* is a mode of relating to the world. It includes a concept of self, others, and the world; a psychological goal the individual strives toward; and cognitive and behavioral patterns (Dreikurs Ferguson, 1984).

In his later years, Adler identified the need to belong and bond with others as the fundamental human motivation and striving (goal), which he linked to the goal of contribution (Dreikurs Ferguson, 2020). Individuals' lifestyle concepts remain relatively stable throughout life. Adler (1956a) connected lifestyle to memories selected by the individual, who chooses what to remember: "In the style of life, formed at the age of four or five, we find the connection between remembrances of the past and actions of the present" (p. 352). ERs reflect individuals' subjective

perspectives (Clark, 2002); individuals recall specific events because they represent an individual's movement and life concepts (Dreikurs Ferguson, 1984). The historical accuracy of ERs is irrelevant. The importance of memories is their *interpretation* and their relevance to present and future life (Adler, 1956a). Individuals' current perspectives influence ERs; they project their lifestyle onto their ERs. ERs therefore may be used as a projective technique (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). Memories thus can be projective data for understanding basic lifestyle elements (Kopp & Dinkmeyer, 1981).

ERs are stories about the past told in the present. Adler emphasized *future movement* in ERs. He saw ERs as stories individuals tell themselves to remind them of their core beliefs and to shape how they face life tasks in the future (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006; Shulman & Mosak, 1995). Levitt-Frank and Shoshana (2021) emphasized the back-and-forth movement between past and present when working with ERs.

ERs and Therapy

ERs are useful for functional assessment. This means that ERs can help therapists understand how their clients see themselves, others, and the world, and how they arrange their symptoms, such as depression, to help them feel they have a place in the world (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). The rationale for using ERs as an assessment tool follows the understanding that individuals remember only the childhood events that align with their current views and that those events are projected onto the ERs (Kopp & Dinkmeyer, 1981; Mayman, 1968; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). The ERs' interactive character enables an open, sensitive therapeutic exchange (Clark, 2002). Only trained and experienced professionals should work with ERs in therapy and training (Dreikurs, 1973; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). There are various methods for interpreting ERs. These include holistic methods for interpretation, such as the headline method, in which the therapist considers a headline for the ER to identify a basic theme, and the typological approach, which suggests that one examine an ER as a whole rather than breaking it into parts. A therapist might find that an ER is relevant to more than one category, such as *seeking excitement* and *seeking justice*. The lifestyle convictions approach relates to the self-concept, self-ideal, picture of the world, and ethical convictions. This requires looking for lifestyle components in the ER (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006; Sarig, 2006). Thematic analysis of ERs also focuses on lifestyle components with thematic variables such as "I am," "Others are," and "Events are" (Clark, 2002). Shifron (2020) emphasized the holistic interpretation of ERs, including identifying

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strengths and effective strategies expressed in the ERs and relating to the ERs as metaphors for a client's current emotional state in all areas of life. The administrative procedure includes asking clients to think of the earliest memory they can remember, before the age of 10, a specific onetime event the client can visualize. The therapist writes down the memory word for word and then asks for the most vivid moment and the feeling at the time. The memory's most vivid moment and the client's feeling in the memory at the time of the memory are vital clues about what is important to the client and how the client interprets the situation described in the memory. Additionally, the most vivid image expresses the metaphoric meaning of the memory (Kopp, 1995; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). Client and therapist engage in cooperative interpretation of ERs; the therapist discusses possible strengths, themes, and strategies with the client (Androutsopoulou, 2013; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006; Shifron, 2020).

The following sections focus on encouragement, recognition of strengths and core concepts, and reconstruction of ERs in therapy.

Encouragement

Adler considered encouragement crucial for human growth and development (Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). He claimed that, in therapy, "we must not deviate from the path of encouragement" (Adler, 1956c, p. 342). Therapists encourage by conveying faith in the client's potential through various interventions (Clark, 2002). Dreikurs (1973) emphasized supportive therapy and referred to encouragement as significant support. Encouragement skills include expressing concern through active listening and empathy, demonstrating respect for clients, and focusing on their strengths and resources (Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). Insight and change are not possible without encouragement, and change requires using "other psychological incentives" (Dreikurs, 1973, p. 70). Insight is beneficial when generated in an atmosphere of trust and courage (Papanek, 1972). Frank (2019) suggested that metaphor work accesses the client's imagination and that creativity in "other psychological incentives" is potentially encouraging. Metaphor work in therapy lets the therapist empathetically align with the client's subjective experience and encourage client-created change (Bluvshtein et al., 2021). Kopp and Eckstein (2004) explained that strong feelings relative to a problem trigger an ER, which is a *metaphor* for a problem. Therefore, as with all metaphor work, working with ERs invites supportive and encouraging interventions.

Recognition of Strengths and Core Concepts

Adler claimed that everyone is born with particular potentialities (Adler, 1956b). Creating awareness of those potentialities and strengths helps develop productive ways to feel a sense of belonging and social interest. Reflecting those strengths to clients is an important intervention in Adlerian therapy (Shifron, 2020). Positive psychology supports this view and emphasizes fostering character strengths for individual growth and fulfillment and increasing feelings of competence (Lavy, 2020; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2019). ERs are a quick method to access and assess individuals' strengths, strategies for belonging, and social interest; therefore, they provide significant clinical material in therapy (Shifron, 2020). This material includes recognizing in clients' ERs the core concepts and central themes hindering their lives (Androutsopoulou, 2013; Papanek, 1972). Three ERs usually provide sufficient information for revealing lifestyle themes in a therapy process (Clark, 2002). ERs help focus on clients' strengths, resources, problems, mistaken ideas about themselves and life, and aspirations (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006; Papanek, 1972; Shifron, 2020).

Reconstructing Early Recollections

Androutsopoulou (2013) claimed that central themes could be recognized in any self-narrative and in ERs. Sarig (2016) called ERs, which are stories of specific events, metaphoric narratives. Understanding ERs as narratives invites one to observe similarities between Adlerian and narrative therapy. Both regard memory as an individual construction rather than a historical account. Furthermore, transforming or reconstructing ERs may invite alternative narratives to those dominating the client's life. As an individual re-edits the episode (specific story), they modify stories in the future (Hester, 2004).

Reconstruction or transformation of an ER involves asking the client, "If you could change the memory in any way, how would you change it?" (Kopp, 1995, p. 44). Thus, the client changes the memory in positive ways, such as by asking for help or performing independently. This process includes a reappraisal of the original experience (Clark, 2002). Reconstruction of an ER allows clients to move from their current self-concept to a desired self-ideal. The therapist encourages clients to use their creativity and strengths in the process of transformation (Shifron, 2020; Willhite, 1979).

Inviting the client to transform an ER "changes the metaphoric structuring of the problem/situation with the potential of stimulating

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a subsequent change in the client's thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning that situation" (Kopp, 1995, p. 36). Reconstructing an ER works to change the client's interpretation of the story and associated emotions (Shifron, 2020). It is an important intervention to create movement in therapy and enable the client to reevaluate and recreate ideas that are more useful for their current functioning (Shifron, 2020; Strauch, 2007).

CASE STUDY

Daniella (pseudonym), age 30, participated in a workshop I delivered on working with ERs. I have extensive training and experience teaching and working in therapy with ERs and integrate various methods of interpretation depending on the needs of the client and the context. Daniella asked to participate in a demonstration and work with an ER she had been thinking of over the previous weeks. She shared that she has two sisters, one 5 years older and the other 2.5 years older than she is. A younger brother, born 2 years after her, died within a few weeks of birth. Daniella said her father passed away a few weeks before the workshop, and she had been thinking of a particular ER since. Before recalling the ER, Daniella said: "I believe this memory played a major role in my relationships with men, especially when overcoming a breakup. It takes me a long time to move on."

I invited Daniella to share the ER from when she was 7 or 8 years old:

> My parents had problems in their marriage due to the death of my brother, lots of fighting openly. At some point, my dad decided to leave. He said openly that the best thing to do is leave. I am very attached to my dad. I couldn't go to sleep unless he came home and gave me a kiss.
>
> The day the fight happened, and he said openly that he is leaving, I get on his knees. He is on the couch, and I am on the floor. And I cry. I am begging him, please don't leave. Please tell me that you will stay. He stayed silent for a while. There was a general silence in the house. As I kept begging him, at some point, he says, OK, I am not going to leave. (But he did).
>
> *Vivid moment*: me begging him, being on his knees.
> *Feeling*: terrified and desperate.

The following is our conversation:

> **Therapist:** It sounds like you had a very special and close relationship with your father.

Daniella: Yes, dad was very special to me.

Therapist: You are sharing openly with us right now, as dad was open in the ER.

Daniella: Yes, I took that from my dad. Openness. I always saw my mom as weak, not openly expressing her emotions. I will share something; I don't know if it is relevant. Only recently, when my dad died, my mother shared what happened when my baby brother died. She held me in her arms and thought that she should be breastfeeding him, and she held that in. She was a survivor.

Therapist: So it sounds like you took things from dad and from mom. Here you are after his death, a survivor talking openly about your feelings.

Daniella: Yes . . . When dad was dying, I was sitting with him in the hospital and asked him, "Do you have trust in me?" He said, "Yes, I trust you and your sisters." [Tearful] And then I said to him, "Dad, you can go now." [Daniella became emotional.]

Therapist: If we can go back into the memory, how would you reconstruct it with the wisdom you now have from your conversation with your father just before he died?

Daniella: So, I am sitting on the couch next to him and say to him, "You can go, Dad, it is OK. We will be OK."

Therapist: I am noticing how you got up from the floor. You are now sitting next to him on the couch, equal and trusting him, and you will be OK and letting go.

At that moment, Daniella was visibly moved and empowered. I (therapist) decided to touch on the connection between the ER, the reconstruction, and Daniella's initial comment as we started the conversation: "I believe [the memory] has played a major role in my relationship to men."

Therapist: Do you see any connection between your movement from the floor to sitting next to dad on the couch and your relationships with men?

Daniella: Yes! I always placed myself below. Dependent. I have always felt inferior in relationships. Never equal.

As a child, Daniella—the youngest child until and following the death of her baby brother—appears to have looked up to and depended on her father. Daniella was surprised at the insight. With this insight and ER reconstruction, together with reflecting her strengths (e.g., trusting herself, letting go in the last conversation with her dad in the hospital),

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she turned to the future. She said: "So, looking at what we have just said, I have hope now when I look forward at me in relationships with men in the future." Daniella shared that she now had a lighter feeling than when entering the conversation. She saw that she could trust herself to be more equal in a relationship.

DISCUSSION

Individual Psychology offers a concept of the theoretical understanding of ERs and the use of ERs in therapy with a client. This concept aligns with Adlerian ideas, including subjectivity, choice, lifestyle, and future, goal-oriented behavior. Individuals remember and choose to recall ERs to remind themselves of their core concepts and beliefs and to prepare themselves for the future. The ERs recalled are always relevant to an individual's lifestyle and current experience (Adler, 1931). Addressing ERs with a client involves movement between the client's lifestyle and current experience and between the past, present, and future.

Daniella introduced her ER by describing problems in her parents' marriage and her dad's decision to leave. She then proceeded to describe what happened "the day the fight happened." I propose that the introduction to an ER, a framework the storyteller establishes by setting themselves in a context of time and place, contributes to the ongoing formation of a coherent and continuous sense of self. According to Habermas and Köber (2015), "Both a synchronic integration of present elements across different situations and a diachronic integration over time are essential" (p. 2) to sustaining a coherent sense of self. While constructing the introduction to the ER, the storyteller can partake in synchronic and diachronic reflection by connecting the story to present or past situations.

According to Bluck (2003), autobiographical memory is particularly useful in challenging times requiring self-change. Habermas and Köber (2015) added that, once disrupted, the individual will attempt to restore a sense of self-continuity reflectively. I suggest that the ER's introduction may be part of the mechanism for restoring a sense of self, particularly when self-change is required in the face of changing or dynamic life circumstances, such as Daniella's experience of her father's death.

Working with ERs enables supportive and encouraging interventions: "Awareness of strengths helps develop productive and creative strategies to actualize feelings of belonging and social interest" (Shifron, 2020, p. 113). We addressed some of Daniella's strengths that were reflected in the ER she shared. I noted her openness in this conversation, like her

father's openness in the memory, and reflected her strength as a survivor participating in the workshop shortly after her father's death. I took the image of the survivor from how Daniella described her mother. I also chose to reflect her movement from seeing her mother in the past as weak to seeing her now as a survivor. During the conversation, Daniella and I worked with the movement between past, present, and future. We moved back and forth between present, past as portrayed in the ER, and recent past (father's death). Toward the end of the conversation, we moved to the future.

Daniella relayed an ER, a narrative that reflected her perception of the situation, interaction, and relationship (Fivush & Haden, 2003). During the conversation, we discussed a central theme as reflected in this ER regarding her view of herself in relationships with men (Androutsopoulou, 2013). Toward the end of our conversation, Daniella understood something significant about a theme in her life hindering her relationships with men.

Reconstructing ERs is an important technique to create movement in therapy because it invites clients to change their interpretations of memories (Shifron, 2020). Through the reconstruction, Daniella realized that she could be equal to a man, "sitting together on the couch" and not on the floor. This realization appeared to be the beginning of new awareness about the role Daniella usually takes in relationships with men. She had said in the ER: "I am very attached to my dad. I couldn't go to sleep unless he came home and gave me a kiss." She appears to have created a concept of herself and men in her childhood that became part of her lifestyle. She realized that she usually depends on men, not trusting herself. As we spoke, she understood that she could be equal and trust herself. She can grow in relationships.

Assessment and the counseling process interrelate (Clark, 2002; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). As seen in this demonstration, ERs can be used as an ongoing and interactive tool for assessment and therapeutic interventions. The emotional trigger for the demonstration and the ER (Kopp, 1995) in the workshop was Daniella's father's death a few weeks prior. Her conversation with her father, talking about trust and saying to him, "You can go now, Dad," was very significant in her growing.

The more a strength is used, the stronger and more available a resource it becomes for an individual (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Focusing on the strength of trust, I invited Daniella to use her wisdom from the conversation with her father in the hospital and reconstruct the ER. I view the reconstruction—with the help of her wisdom and actions in the

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conversation with her father in the hospital—as bringing new insight she already was creating into conscious awareness. The movement between present and past is empowering in a therapeutic conversation.

Beyond the option of reconstructing an ER to invite change in the present, I propose a process of employing a change described *in the present*, even if the client is not yet aware of the significance of that change, and importing it to reconstruct the ER. Daniella created change during the conversation with her father in the hospital as she let him go and trusted herself to do so. By inviting her to import this strength, knowledge, and wisdom to reconstruct the ER, she could acknowledge her movement and growth and highlight the change she created. This led to opportunities for growth in the future. As Daniella said: "So, looking at what we have just said, I have hope now when I look forward at me in relationships with men in the future."

I believe that this back-and-forth movement is beneficial in accentuating insight through the ER's powerful metaphoric language ("sitting on the couch"). In the case described, it allowed for an expansion of how Daniella sees herself in relation to men and in her relationships with men. Moving from the present and recent past to the past by the ER reconstruction—using the client's wisdom in the present—opens a significant window to the future. Reconstructing an ER, together with encouragement, is a powerful supportive technique for working with cognition and lifestyle and creating change. Human beings are storytellers (Fivush, 2017). As storytellers, we can edit and update our life stories by reconstructing ERs.

This was not a lifestyle analysis through ER work or part of a therapeutic process but a demonstration of working with a client with a present issue and an ER. As Daniella and I spoke, I chose what to relate to in the ER and the present issue. I saw other themes in the ER, for example, the silence Daniella mentioned and that her father said he would not leave but did. I chose not to mention these because this intervention was a demonstration in a workshop; however, these might be interesting and relevant topics to attend to in therapy should they arise.

In sharing this demonstration of ER work through a case study, I invite practitioners to explore and experiment with ER work to foster the contribution of Individual Psychology theory and practice. In addition, I wish to contribute to the literature on ERs, therapy, and the back-and-forth movement between the past, present, and future when working with ERs in therapy.

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Mia Levitt-Frank, PhD (mialefr@gmail.com), is an Adlerian psychotherapist in private practice. She is a faculty member of the Adlerian School of Psychotherapy and cofounder of the Coaching School at the Adler Institute in Israel. Mia is a faculty member of ICASSI. Her research fields include early recollections, culture, social class, and metaphors.