

## **Why Not . . . “On Purpose”?**

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*Through the use of case examples, the authors present the concept that behavior might best be viewed from the perspective of “goal directedness” as opposed to internal or external causality. With an understanding of the individual’s psychological movement, teachers and counselors might be in a better position to provide more effective and inviting psychological services to students.*

Jason, a 14 year-old eighth-grader, showed up one morning in early March at the school counselor’s office. He explained that he needed to register and that this would be his third school this year. He also explained that his mother was late for her new job waiting tables at one of the local restaurants and couldn’t come in with him to sign any papers until her day off. His stepfather had just moved the three of them to town in the hope of finding employment in the oil fields. Jason said that his stepfather was a welder but had a hard time keeping a job since he often showed up for work either hung-over or drunk. They left their last home because they couldn’t afford to pay the rent and had previously been evicted from a house they had only lived in for three months in another community.

Jason talked about his past school experiences saying that, as much as he would like to do well, he was pretty frustrated with school and felt like he didn’t fit in. He was behind in his classes and failing at his last school. Jason indicated that this school would probably be no better than any of his other

school experiences. His records showed that he had been in and out of AEP (the Alternative Education Program) for various disciplinary issues including confrontations with teachers (and other authority figures), impulsive (negative) behavior, and truancy. When asked about it, Jason explained that he preferred being sent to the AEP because he could do his work there—it was quiet and the teachers were willing to help him. He also said that being in AEP made it easier to be in school: He had no friends and wouldn't need to socialize while in the Alternative Education Program.

Jason talked about the fact that he spends most of his time unsupervised; his mother works extra hours and his stepfather is never home. He also explained that he just got off probation for shoplifting which he said he did only to be initiated into a gang at a previous school. Jason said he no longer was a gang member although the other school reported that he seemed to hang with kids who were. The general impression gained from this first meeting with Jason was that he was angry, disenfranchised, and, often, explosive. However, his records showed him to be quite bright, having a high potential for succeeding in school. At times he seemed to display a real sensitivity toward students who were having difficulty fitting into the conventional student role and talked about how he had helped a couple of kids he met in his probation officer's office.

## **Frames of Reference**

Current psychologies provide us with three basic frames of reference for understanding students such as Jason—Behavioristic, Psychoanalytic, and Humanistic. Each of these is like a pair of glasses that allows us to look at the individual and come to an understanding of his/her behavior. Usually, one of these frames of reference will help us understand Jason and see more clearly what it is like to be him. It is the point of view we choose to operate from that makes a considerable difference in our approach to

working with the various “Jasons” we run across in the schools.

First Force Psychologies, the Behavioristic, particularly those put forth by J. B. Watson, B. F. Skinner, and other behaviorists, consider the individual as being shaped by external factors. This view of the “Jasons” of the world would see them as being victims of external events over which they have no control. Therefore, the external environment would have to be manipulated for change to occur.

Second Force Psychologies constitute the early Freudian or psychoanalytic approaches to understanding behavior. This is an illness oriented model (Goble, 1970) wherein the person is viewed as being driven by “forces within.” Evidence of the existence of this point of view can still be seen in such beliefs as a student like Jason being thought of as “filled with anger.” With such an orientation, the counselor might focus on how to help Jason control or manage this anger.

There is yet a third view available to us for understanding human behavior. This Third Force in Psychology is represented by such individuals as Alfred Adler, Abraham Maslow, Arthur Combs, Donald Snygg, and William Purkey. These are the phenomenological or “self” psychologies that view behavior as the result of the individual being “drawn toward” goals or outcomes rather than being “pushed by” forces within or factors without. One of the most significant contributions of Alfred Adler to understanding human behavior (Milliren, Evans & Newbauer, 2003) was the concept that behavior should be examined from a purposive view – what is the use for or goal of the behavior?

Without recognizing the teleological (goal-directed) nature of behavior, it is impossible to understand the individual’s psychological movement. “In effect, the individual is perceived as being able to *choose* those behaviors that will move him or

her toward a desired objective. Motivation is viewed as more of a pull than a push, with the individual

moving toward those immediate and long-range outcomes or objectives that are important in the frame of reference of the individual" (Milliren, Evans & Newbauer, 2003, p. 101). "Man is not pushed by causes; his behavior is not determined by his heredity or by his environment. Instead, he is pulled toward the goals he creates and chooses to pursue." (Turner & Pew, 1978, p. 41). Thus, the "Jasons" are making choices about their movement through the world and our understanding of their behavior and their being should be based on looking at what is "in front of" them rather than looking at "what lies behind."

This point of view does not exclude some of the tenets of First and Second Force psychologies, it just takes what is workable from these approaches and combines them with the abilities of the human being to dream, adapt, learn, plan, and move. Consider the last time you sat in a meeting with a notepad and pen in hand. Did you take any notes? If so, why? Was it because some internal force inside you just made you write and you couldn't help yourself? Or, was it because the pen was just there in your hand and it forced you to take notes? Or, was it because you wanted to remember something later on? Or, possibly look good by appearing to be involved and interested? It seems almost too obvious that the answer lies in the purpose of the behavior rather than the causes. We do what we do "in order to," rather than "because of." So, rather than looking for the causes of Jason's misbehavior, we may want to begin to look at the goals or purposes these behaviors serve.

"From the time of infancy, goals give direction for a person's actions. The goal need not be stated verbally, and the person need not be consciously aware of the goal" (Ferguson, 1995, p. 4). Rudolf Dreikurs, while working with children and their parents at the Lincoln Center in Chicago in the late 1930s, "... made a significant discovery: that the misbehavior of children, no matter how varied their personality or background, followed one or more of four distinctive

goals (Turner & Pew, 1978, p. 156).” These four immediate goals of misbehavior offer a means for understanding the child’s private logic. Briefly, the goals of misbehavior include: (1) Attention-Getting—to obtain undue attention or service; (2) Power—to demonstrate power or defiance; (3) Revenge—to seek to get even or retaliate; and (4) Inadequacy or Assumed Disability—to completely give up and be left alone. Even though these goals might lead to negative outcomes for the child, it is still the child’s belief that by pursuing these ends, he/she will be able to achieve status and belonging.

Helping counselors and teachers look at behavior as goal-oriented is not easy. The concept of causality is firmly entrenched in our psychological tradition. It was extremely important to Dreikurs “to help others look at behavior from the standpoint of goals and purposes rather than from antecedent causes. Mechanistic and causal thinking so pervaded people’s perception of behavior that it required a reorientation of their reasoning processes to think in terms of goals (Turner & Pew, 1978, pp. 155-6).”

## **Assumptions about Behavior**

Dinkmeyer and Sperry (2000) point out, there are four common mistaken assumptions about human behavior. “These four minitheories of human behavior explain away, rather than understand, behavior” (p. 139).

### **Behavior Is a Product of Environmental Factors**

This (view) suggests that where you live and the associated environment determines how you behave. While environment influences behavior, it is not the sole determinant (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000). We all know those who have commented, “Well, what do you expect? Look at the family (or neighborhood) he/she comes from!” Yet, we also know of individuals who model useful behaviors and have succeeded

in life regardless of their home or family environment. We know of those who, although appearing to come from “ideal” environments, are unsuccessful in their life journey. If an environmental factor, such as divorce, is the cause for behavior, why aren’t all persons affected in the same way? We have to realize that it is not one’s experiences that dictate behavior but the way one experiences the experience that influences the choices one makes. And our behavior choices are based on what we perceive to be in our best interest (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990).

### **Behavior Is a Product of Heredity**

Current research gives strong evidence of genetic influences on personality characteristics, it is not the sole variable in student behavior (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000). It is not uncommon to hear someone say, “Well, just look at his/her parents!” as if the explanation for behavior is in the genes. Or, we find our evidence for a child’s behavior in an uncle, aunt, or some other family member that is “just like that!” This is not to discount the role of genetic influences on temperament and personality, however, we still have choices in how we express that temperament and personality.

### **Behavior Is a Product of Age and Stage of Development**

“Those who hold this view see behavior as a function of chronological age...(however) the opinion ignores the wide variability among individuals ...”(Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000, p. 139). Think about our labels for behavior that relate to age or stage of development such as the “terrible twos” and “turbulent teens.” This assumes that everyone is subject to the display of certain behaviors just because they have “arrived” at a specific point in their development. However, if we examine a broad spectrum of two-year-olds, not all of them can be described as “terrible.”

Many of the teenagers we know are not experiencing “turbulence.” Age and stage theories of behavior, although useful in a general sense, obscure our opportunities to understand behavior as it is unfolding – it denies the possibility there is a purpose or use for acting in a specific way.

### **Behavior Is a Product of Gender**

“Sex-role stereotyping is perhaps becoming less prevalent, but it accounts for differences in behavior by “blaming” the gender of the child “(Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000, p. 139). We know of individuals who discount the misbehavior of boys with a statement like “Boys will be boys.” We know many who place higher standards for sexual conduct on teenage girls than on boys. All of these gender related beliefs interfere with a full understanding of behavior. We cannot deny that gender has a powerful influence on behavior. However, gender is only an influence and not a determinant. It is important that we maintain an awareness that individuals have choices and individuals select those behaviors that serve to move toward attaining significance and belonging.

### **Which Option?**

If the modern view of the individual promotes the concept that people have choices, then First and Second Force Psychologies are not the best options for understanding behavior and working with the various Jasons (and Janes). If we view the Jasons (and Janes) as the “dis’d” students in our schools, the disconnected, disruptive, and disenfranchised (Melton, 2002), then something has happened to these students over which they have little or no control. If something has happened to them, there is probably little that can be done to change the precipitating event or condition. This is the problem with First and Second Force thinking: The individual has no responsibility for what has happened or is happening. The individual does not have choices if he/she behaves as the result of internal drives.



A person does not have choices if he/she is a victim of his/her environment.

## **Brad**

Recently, in a supervision conference, a practicum student was discussing one of her clients. Brad was a first grader that had everyone in school buffaloed! They had reached the point where they just did not know what to do with him other than to send him home when he misbehaved. When the teacher asked Brad to do work, he would absolutely refuse to do it. He would not stay in his seat but freely roamed the classroom. Brad would provoke other students and then hit them if they said anything about it. When he was sent to the principal to be disciplined, Brad refused to talk. As we discussed the case, the practicum student kept asking the questions, "Why? What sets him off?" As she continued to ask these questions, it was clear that she was looking for an explanation, she wanted to know the causes. However, even if it were possible to ascertain the specific events that did "set him off," it is likely that there would be little anyone could do about it. The important question then becomes, "What's the use?"

By looking to the purpose for misbehavior, we might begin to understand the child's private logic and his behaviors start to make sense to us. The goal of this child appeared to be control; to have things his way – a kind of "I do what I want whenever I want and no one can stop me" attitude toward life. Three further questions to the practicum student helped confirm the hypothesis:

"Is he cute?" "Yes."

"Is he sweet?" "Yes."

"Who spoils him?" *"Mother. . . and there is also a grandmother who lives in the home!"*

Thus, we have a child who believes he can get what he wants when he wants it and others should give in to him and let him have his way. When things are going his way, he is pleasant and easy to be around; when things are not to his liking, he does as he pleases and no one can do anything about it. If we approach our intervention from a causal view, Brad should always feel like everything is “going his way” if we wish to have him cooperate and act in a pleasant manner. However, from the perspective of purpose, what “sets him off” is any situation that displeases him. By understanding his goal of power, “I want what I want when I want it,” we can begin to help him discover that happiness in life is better achieved by wanting what he gets.

### **Larry**

Larry, 7, has been described as taking advantage of everyone and “knows no boundaries” since he was three. He currently lives with his father and stepmother, although the father doesn’t have much involvement with Larry. The stepmother says she is “doing her best” but admits to wanting to give up! She lets Larry do as he pleases because, most of the time, it is just easier than trying to intervene when he misbehaves. Larry has been placed in a classroom for ED (Emotionally Disturbed) students at school and has intimidated the other students as well as the teacher. From a counselor’s perspective, the question becomes “What is going on for Larry?” Is he emotionally disturbed or is he disturbing others with his emotions (tantrums, etc.)? Is the behavior caused by some early experience? Or, is he choosing to “do as he pleases”?

Larry’s family of origin was quite dysfunctional and he was allowed to pretty much do as he wanted. Most of the time, his parents and others would “buy him off” with things and activities just so he would behave. In many respects, Larry was allowed total freedom to have and do what he wanted and he could “blackmail” others into getting him whatever.

Our choice as his counselor is that we can look at Larry's current problems as being deeply rooted in some unknown early experience that can't be changed or we can look at the attitudes Larry developed as a result of his experiences and help Larry develop more useful attitudes.

## **Yvette**

Parker Elementary School has an open door policy that allows parents to come to lunch with their children whenever they have the time or opportunity. Yvette reportedly cries all the time because she has no one who will come to school to eat lunch with her. If we accept this view of her behavior, then the only way we can offer a resolution would be for someone to come to lunch. However, if we look at behavior as being purposive, then we may want to guess the goal of this behavior—it may be possible that she cries so others will feel sorry for her or so she can manipulate others.

Once her goal is discovered and disclosed, Yvette may begin to change her behavior and having company at lunchtime may not appear to be so important. Yvette has discovered “water power!” When she cries people respond to her and, in some way or another, attempt to get her to “stop the tears.” Given this goal of attention, how might the counselor or teacher help her get noticed for more positive behaviors?

As students get older, we may need to take a broader look at some of the basic mistakes an individual might make in terms of how he/she chooses to fit in and find a place in his/her world. These mistaken “life themes” become the goals for behavior and can include any of the following beliefs or combination of beliefs:

“I must be first or on top.”

“I am entitled and others must serve me (or give in to me).”

"I must be approved of by others."  
 "I am morally (or intellectually) right or superior to others."  
 "I must be the best or most perfect."  
 "I must be the boss (or in control) of others."  
 "I am treated unjustly and have a right to retaliate."  
 "I must be treated as special."  
 "I am helpless and incapable."  
 "I am no good and unworthy."  
 "I am not able to do what I should."  
 "I am responsible for the behavior (or feelings) of others."  
 "Others are here to serve me."  
 "Other people cannot be trusted."  
 "Others are unfair unless they do what I want."  
 "Others are ignorant and do not stack up to my level of competence."  
 "Others should treat me with kid gloves (or cater to my every whim)."  
 "Others know more than I do and I have to race to catch up."  
 "Other people are the cause of my misery."  
 "Others hurt me so I have a right to hurt them back."  
 "The world is a hostile (unjust) place."  
 "The world is a dangerous place."  
 "The world owes me."

The foregoing list is just a sampling of mistaken beliefs held by some adolescents. Counselors must listen to and observe the student's behavior in order to ascertain the beliefs on which they operate.

## **On Purpose**

From an Adlerian perspective of goals or purpose, we are able to begin to more adequately perceive how our students move through the world. It is likely that Jason, for example, believes he can only fit in by acting the rebel. He wants to be a part of the group by behaving in such a way as to be apart

from the group. He is unable to find useful ways of fitting in and so he chooses to be at war with the authority of the school and community. However, there are two specific positive items of interest: Jason's empathy and concern for other youth who are just like him and the statement he made about wanting to do well. Let us think in terms of "on purpose" and help Jason to understand his goals and psychological movement. He is a prime candidate for the exploration of his values and beliefs who could also use a heavy dose of encouragement and invitations (Purkey & Schmidt, 1987).

As much as students like Jason shun adult authority, he is quite likely to be interested in knowing what significant adults have to say (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000). A frank discussion with a caring counselor might allow Jason an opportunity to examine his beliefs about self, others, and how the world should be. The counselor could help Jason through an assessment of his strengths and abilities. "In working with adolescents, either individually or in groups, it is helpful to keep in mind the life-task areas of work, friendship, love, getting along with oneself, search for meaning, and leisure and recreation (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000, p. 134)." A simple rating of these elements on a scale from 1 to 9, for example, would allow Jason the opportunity to take stock of his satisfaction with life (Milliren, Evans & Newbauer, 2003). With this approach, the counselor is in a position to help Jason re-think what is important to him. It is important that the counselor help Jason develop "the 'psychological muscle' to meet life's challenges (Eckstein, Rasmussen & Wittschen, 1999, p. 46)."

By looking at Jason in terms of his psychological movement rather than as a victim of his circumstances, he can be perceived as being in the process of disconnecting, disrupting, and disenfranchising rather than as stuck in a life space where he is disconnected, disruptive, or disenfranchised. If he is no longer viewed as being in a situation over which he has no control, the outlook for Jason becomes extremely

hopeful. From this alternative perspective, the counselor should work to ascertain what conclusions have been drawn by the student about the self, others and the world. The counselor helps the student understand personal direction achievement. Jason can be encouraged to develop his potential on the useful side of life which is to connect, to find belonging, and to feel enfranchised.

Adlerian psychology offers the opportunity to examine the purpose of the behavior: "What's the use?" What is the payoff?" "What is the goal of the child's behavior?" Once the goal of the behavior has been ascertained; the counselor can begin to understand the private logic of the individual. By our understanding private logic we demonstrate empathy and begin to connect with the child in new and meaningful ways. Then we can begin to purposefully move toward developing opportunities for cooperation and contribution. Jason can connect with other students and contribute to their learning in a positive and powerful way. Brad's, Larry's and Yvette's counselors can help them design ways to gain a sense of belonging and status in their respective classrooms.

Alfred Adler presented a positive approach to understanding the purpose of behavior. It was his belief, where misbehavior was involved, that the purpose of the behavior could be moved from the useless side of life to the useful side of life through goal disclosure, re-education, and encouragement. This view is "basic to invitational counseling and its foundations of the perceptual tradition and self-concept theory....The process of helping a client to examine fictional goals, establish new goals, and choose appropriate alternative behaviors to reach those goals is similar to the inviting sequence" in invitational counseling (Purkey & Schmidt, 1987, p. 113). Through an emphasis on positive contributions and cooperation with others, it is possible for students to increase their feelings of self-respect and community feeling.

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