

Adlerian Group Counseling *and* Therapy *Step-by-Step*



Manford A. Sonstegard
James Robert Bitter
with Peggy Pelonis

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Dedications

Manford A. Sonstegard

To my wife and partner, Rita Sonstegard

James Robert Bitter

*To my life partner Lynn Williams and to our children
Alison and Nora*

Contents

<i>Foreword by Gerald Corey</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Manford A. Sonstegard: The Man and His Therapy</i> <i>An Introduction by James Robert Bitter</i>	<i>xv</i>
Part I: The Process and Practice of Adlerian Group Counseling and Therapy	
Chapter 1. A Rationale for Adlerian Group Work	3
Chapter 2. Adlerian Group Counseling and Therapy: Step by Step	17
Part II: Theoretical Foundations	
Chapter 3. Theory, Process, and Structure in Adlerian Group Work	59
Chapter 4. The Practice of Adlerian Group Counseling and Therapy	95
Chapter 5. Counseling Children in Groups	135
Chapter 6. The Education and Training of Group Specialists <i>By James Robert Bitter, Peggy Pelonis, and Manford A. Sonstegard</i>	161
Authors' Notes	185
Indexes	187

Foreword

Adlerian Group Counseling & Therapy: Step by Step is a book you will want to read if you are interested in the theory and practice of group counseling. In this book, Drs. Manford Sonstegard and Jim Bitter bring to life group counseling from an Adlerian perspective. They clearly describe the process and practice of Adlerian group therapy through commentaries and transcribed interactions of their group process. They also concisely describe key concepts of Adlerian theory that can be applied to Adlerian groups as well as to a host of other groups that rest on different theoretical foundations.

Alfred Adler made significant contributions to contemporary therapeutic practice of both individual and group counseling and psychotherapy. Adler was the first psychiatrist to use group methods in a systematic way in child guidance centers in the 1920s in Vienna. Building on Adler's work, Rudolf Dreikurs did a great deal to translate and develop Adlerian principles into the practice of group counseling and group therapy in both private and public settings. Adlerian interventions have been widely applied to diverse client populations, with all ages, and in many different settings—but especially in schools.

Adler's contributions to the development of group counseling have far-reaching implications to the development of many other therapeutic models. In many ways, Adler can be considered a significant pioneer in the field of group counseling, influencing models based on dynamics, cognitions, emotional response, and existential meaning. A number of theories in the cognitive-behavioral camp clearly have some roots in Adlerian principles and contributions, including rational-emotive-behavior therapy and cognitive therapy. Further, many of Adler's ideas have been incorporated in the writing and theories of Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, and Abraham Maslow. Both Frankl and May considered Adler to be a forerunner of the existential

movement, because Adler believed that human beings were free to choose and were entirely responsible for what they make of themselves. This view also places Adler at the center of the subjective approach to psychology, an approach that focuses on the internal determinants of behavior: values, beliefs, attitudes, goals, interests, personal meaning, perceptions of reality, and striving toward self-actualization. All of these concepts have important implications for the practice of group counseling and therapy.

Adlerian Group Counseling & Therapy: Step by Step represents a distillation of some of the most significant ideas of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs as applied to group work. Drs. Sonstegard and Bitter provide a compelling rationale for the practice of group work. These authors illustrate the development of a group from the formation to the final stage, giving readers a clear picture of what is important to accomplish at each stage of a group. This book also addresses many practical dimensions of Adlerian group process, including the importance of forming a group relationship; how to create a democratic and accepting climate in a group; ways group counselors can conduct a psychological assessment of each of the members of a group; approaches to increasing awareness and insight on the part of members; techniques aimed at helping members translate their insights into actions; and methods of reorientation and reeducation through encouragement and building on the personal strengths discovered within the group experience. The authors describe and use an active style of group leadership that offers a structure to assist group members in getting the most from a counseling group. Although the approach they describe can be considered directive at times, Adlerians are highly respectful of the group members and their capacities to play an active part in the growth experiences inherent in group process. Adlerian group counseling is a collaborative approach that can get results and lead to empowerment of the members.

I found the chapter on the theory and practice of Adlerian group counseling particularly valuable in serving as a review of key concepts and specific group techniques. Some of the concepts concisely described include holism, teleological orientation, community feeling and its social interest, lifestyle and its assessment, and the encouragement process, to name a few. Drs. Sonstegard and Bitter highlight a number of interventions that can be usefully applied to many different kinds of groups with diverse client populations. A few of the techniques that I found particularly useful are interpretation, uses of "The Question," lifestyle assessment, early recollections, and challenging basic

beliefs. Although the techniques may be of interest to many readers, it is my belief that the Adlerian philosophy underlying group practice is what will be most valuable to readers. Personally, I have incorporated much of an Adlerian philosophy into my practice of group work and find that this approach gives me a strong foundation as well as a great deal of freedom. Because of its breadth, the model is also able to utilize techniques drawn from other theoretical models. Readers of *Adlerian Counseling & Therapy: Step by Step* will find the book meaningful, regardless of their level of experience in facilitating groups.

—Gerald Corey, EdD
Professor Emeritus, Human Services
California State University at Fullerton

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Manford A. Sonstegard: The Man and His Therapy

An Introduction by James Robert Bitter

I first met Dr. Manford A. Sonstegard in 1974. He was 63 years old, and he had already served as a teacher, counselor, principal, consultant, and counselor educator. Following the lead of his great teacher, Rudolf Dreikurs, he had helped to establish Family Education Centers in five different states, parts of the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa, where he had also served as an educational consultant to the government of Ethiopia. In addition, he had developed Dreikurs' (1960) teleo-analytic approach to group counseling into a comprehensive art form with a fully developed process and practice (Dreikurs & Sonstegard, 1967, 1968a, 1968b; Sonstegard & Dreikurs, 1973). Sonstegard would eventually update his group chapter with Dreikurs twice (Sonstegard & Dreikurs, 1975; Sonstegard, Dreikurs, & Bitter, 1982).

In 1974, I was completing doctoral studies at Idaho State University and coordinating the first Conference on Adlerian Psychology to be held at that university. Dr. Steven Feit recommended Sonstegard. Dr. Feit, a graduate of West Virginia University, had taken a course or two from "Sonste" before joining the faculty in the Department of Counselor Education at Idaho State University. Sonste was able to present in a number of different areas, but my main interest was in his work with groups. I asked him if he would be willing to do some group counseling demonstrations and discuss the process of Adlerian group counseling and psychotherapy. His affirmative answer included a request for "adolescents who were not 'A' students."

"Really good students always volunteer," he said, "but they do not make for the most interesting of demonstrations. Young people with

some difficulties have something to gain, and therefore, they have much to offer."

"Fine," I said. "I will find you the worst kids we can round up." And that is exactly what I did. I went to all of the area schools, and teachers recommended students who were failing or in trouble at school or with the law; all of the original eight students had turned disruption into an art form. Not all of the original eight showed up, but the five who did had exactly two 1 1/2-hour group sessions, one on stage in front of almost 400 people who were attending the conference. In *Adlerian Group Counseling & Therapy: Step by Step* (chap. 2), one of these sessions is completely delineated with our commentary.

The conference lasted 4 days, and the group sessions changed the lives of five adolescents. They followed Dr. Sonstegard around for the full time he was there, eating meals with him and buying him presents. He listened, and he helped them with whatever they brought for his consideration. Six-month and 1-year follow-ups with teachers and parents indicated the changes with these five students were holding.

I completed my doctoral studies in 1974, and in September of that year I was lucky enough to secure a faculty position in the Counseling Program chaired by Dr. Sonstegard at what is now the Marshall University Graduate College in Charleston, West Virginia. He came to my office the first morning that I was on the job. I was unpacking boxes of books. He said, "Come on. We're going to a school to do some counseling."

As we headed to a small mountain community about 30 miles from Charleston, my training as a counselor educator began. He would eventually cover everything from counseling process and collaborative consultation to in vivo supervision (Dreikurs & Sonstegard, 1966), but he started with a commentary on breakfast. "Look at that young man eating potato chips and drinking a Coke as he heads out to work in the fields. I would never hire him. He needs protein, or he won't have enough energy to get to the afternoon."

His comments were somewhat disconcerting to me, because that is exactly what I had ingested an hour earlier. We arrived at the school, greeted the principal and a couple of teachers Sonste already knew, and went to work. In a small room off the cafeteria, there were five adolescents and two graduate students waiting to meet with us. Sonste introduced one of the graduate students to the group of teenagers and asked them if this student might talk with them for a while. Then he indicated to the student that she might start.

Although she mostly gathered information from these young people initially, I remember thinking that she was more confident than I

would have been in her shoes. About 20 minutes into the session, she stopped to ask Sonste what she should do next. He simply asked her: "What do you make out of Tom's concern that people are always picking on him and he gets so angry?" The graduate student felt that maybe Tom felt hurt. In turn, Sonste asked the other graduate student and then each of the group members. When he got to me, I thought I had heard some pretty good hunches and could think of nothing new to offer.

"I have another idea," Sonste noted. "Would you like to hear it? I think Tom gets picked on, because everyone knows that he is an easy target. He expects to be mistreated, and he goes off at the slightest provocation—like a firecracker on the fourth of July."

It was the first time I had ever seen a group *recognition reflex*. His own peers instantly confirmed how they often "pushed" Tom and "taunted" him just to get a rise out of him. Even Tom acknowledged that he went off easily. Still, Sonste did not let this become a group discussion of Tom, the victim. He engaged all of us in a discussion of the goals and purposes of peer abuse. Even back then, he was attempting to reclaim those who felt marginalized and excluded by those in favored group positions, an effort he continues to pursue in his work today (Sonstegard, Bitter, & Pelonis-Peneros, 2001).

On the way home, he asked me what I thought about the morning. I told him that I had learned a lot, but I didn't feel I had much to offer.

"Nonsense," he said. "You were there, and you made a contribution. The graduate student who started the group spent the last two semesters watching me lead groups. This was her first time to begin a group on her own. She will co-lead with us for this semester, and then next semester, she may be ready to start her own group with weekly supervision and only periodic interventions by us." Then with a wry smile: "It takes time to prepare and train good group leaders."

"Let me guess," I said. "It all starts with a good breakfast."

Thus, I began a friendship and working relationship that has lasted more than a quarter of a century. In the early years, I had as much to learn as any of his graduate students. I had read a great deal, but I lacked experience and adequate supervision. Sonste trained me without ever letting me feel less than a colleague in good standing. He took me with him everywhere he went: to schools and community agencies, on consultation trips to many different cities, and to conventions where we would present new material and offer demonstrations. Initially, I watched and asked a lot of questions. In a very short period of time, however, he was having me do the work, intervening when

necessary, but giving me lots of freedom to experiment and develop my own style.

Sonste was then, and is now, the single greatest teacher I ever had. He was not just *good* at his work. He was a model for everything he taught. Like many people, I have had to *learn* the principles of Adlerian psychology and develop a community feeling with social interest. In Sonste, these attributes have always been a natural part of his very being. When he met Dreikurs, what he learned really affirmed what he already believed—what he already “lived.”

Adlerians believe that all behavior occurs in a social context and is, therefore, interpersonally motivated and best understood systemically. In this sense, Adlerian counselors and therapists attempt to understand individuals holistically. We are not interested in studying human beings as a set of parts, but rather seek to know the whole person as she or he moves through life. Young children, experiencing a normal feeling of inferiority, strive for a better position—for competence and mastery. These early strivings can be understood as movements toward immediate goals: movements that may be *conscious* or *unconscious* (Adlerians use these terms as adjectives rather than as nouns representing reified states of mind). Eventually, individuals develop more long-term goals of completion, actualization, or perfection, and these life goals unify our personality such that every thought, feeling, action, belief, conviction, and value can be understood to be part of the *movement* toward our fictional endpoints.

This individual movement toward a life goal is what Adlerians call one's style of living or *lifestyle*. Because we are social beings, our movement through life is heavily influenced by heredity and environment. Both heredity and environment, however, are less important than the interpretations that people make of these influences. The family, for example, is an enormous influence on who we are, but neither the model set by our parents nor the birth position we hold in the family is as important as the meaning that each person assigns to these experiences. We all interpret life and then seek a place in it. How we claim that place in life defines much of our value and worth to others. We have the freedom to choose.

Because we can choose who we will be and how we will act, Adler (1931/1958) noted that it was possible for people to develop on either the useless side of life or the useful side. The former almost always includes mistaken notions about self, others, and the world. This useless side involves pessimism, self-absorption, and goals of superiority in relation to others. The useful side, on the other hand, is character-

ized by what Adler called a *community feeling*, a sense of belonging to the community of human beings past, present, and future. Such a feeling is innate and must be developed in the young: It is enacted through what Adlerians call *social interest*, an interest in the welfare of others that is just as important as our own well-being. People with this kind of social interest feel connected to others. They meet the universal tasks of life with courage, confidence (optimism), and a sense of humor. They find life meaningful, and they assign significance to others as well as self. This allows them to facilitate the growth of others, because they have learned to get along with themselves (Mosak, 2000).

Over the years, Sonste's total congruence with the Adlerian model has helped him train counselors and therapists in the United States and Canada as well as in Africa, Europe, and South America. He has trained and supervised professionals and paraprofessionals in individual, couples, and family counseling, working with all ages and with multiple cultures. His most consistent interests, however, have remained with the practice and supervision of Adlerian group counseling and therapy.

In 1996, an interview in the *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* highlighted the life and work of Sonstegard (Bitter, 1996). This book grew out of that initial effort and is an attempt to offer our readers a measure of the genius and therapeutic gifts people witness in Sonste's work. Similar to his style of training, the book is divided into two parts. The first part is intended to engage the reader experientially, almost as if you might be watching Sonste lead a group. It starts with a brief rationale for group process (chap. 1) followed immediately by an actual typescript of a group experience with adolescents that Sonste conducted in Idaho (chap. 2). That typescript is arranged so that you can see our commentary on the group experience as you read. We recommend that you read the whole group transcript first without commentary and then review it again with commentary on our thinking and purposeful interventions. The second part of the book presents the theoretical foundations that underlie our approach and model. In chapter 3, we present the basic theory, structure, and flow of Adlerian group counseling and therapy. Because we believe that adolescents function psychologically in ways similar to adults—albeit with less experience in the world and their own developmental issues—we provide the essential practice guidelines for Adlerian group counseling and therapy in chapter 4. This is followed by the special considerations we bring to group counseling with children (chap. 5). Part II

concludes with our thoughts about the training, education, and supervision of group counselors and group therapists (chap. 6).

At the age of 92, Sonstegard is working with counselors in England, training parents and teachers, and running groups for adolescents. He lives with his wife Rita in the English countryside where they have been since moving there in 1997. "It's an adventure," he told me just before he left the United States. "Sometimes, we have to let go of everything we have, of everything we know and all that is safe and familiar; life happens now and in the future, and we have to go out to meet it."

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