

Counseling – an overview of the adlerian theory

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Alfred Adler was the founder of Individual Psychology, the definition of which is the indivisibility of the human personality. The Adlerian theory supposes a single motivating force behind all our behavior, that of striving for perfection. They attempt also to marry the disparities between "The Self-concept" and "The Self-ideal". Along with these come the "Weltbild" or worldview and our own personal "right-wrong code" known as "The Ethical convictions". Adler argued that humans are born striving to belong and are motivated by feelings of inferiority throughout their lives.

In order to clearly define what is unhealthy we need to take a look at what is deemed healthy in as far as Adlerian theory has tabled it. The aptitude for a "Feeling of community" is necessary thereafter becoming ability followed by attitude and motivation. Alfred Adler maintained that individuals were all born with this but that it has to be nurtured to be of any value as in the ability to make contact with others, relating to them in useful ways and then contributing to the common welfare (Henry T. Stein 1997).

The intellectual capabilities include understanding others' points of view and needs, accepting common sense over private logic and recognizing the interdependency of people. Appreciating the contributions of others and reasoning with a view to the immediate and future social consequences. The emotional capabilities include empathy for others, feeling connected with others and the ability to feel and express acceptance, liking and love for others. In relation to the environment, or our "Style of life", there are both attitudinal and motivational capacities.

The attitudinal capacities include feeling at home on earth, a sense of harmony with the universe and a deep identification with others. This also

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means letting go of the preoccupation of self and along with this comes a profound sense of belonging. The motivational capacities include sustaining an active, creative and generous interest in the welfare of others. Contributing significantly to the community and making unconditional, ongoing, spontaneous and positive social effort. The feeling of community is not manifest as mere conformity rather it implies a constant striving for improvement and correction toward an ideal community for all.

From an Adlerian point of view, genuine ethics are a result of a high level of the "Feeling of community" and are a reflection of optimum mental health. Harold Mosak (1995) identified five underlying assumptions to the Adlerian theory. A) The individual is unique, b) the individual is self consistent, c) the individual is responsible, d) the person is creative, an actor, a chooser, and e) people in a soft deterministic way can direct their own destinies (Mosak, 1995, p87). This is basically the identification of what we are born with.

The understanding is however that mental ill health occurs when these are not properly nurtured with a view towards enriching the community as a whole. We now can start painting a clearer picture of unhealthy functioning in an individual. A sense of inferiority is an indicator of mental ill health, this of course, only being a symptom of the larger problem, that being "Self-obsession". Self-obsession occurs when there is a lack in the feeling of community. Another indicator is when strivings are for the individual's greater glory and not for the purpose of overcoming life's difficulties.

If the individual is not engaged in striving for self-realization, in contribution to humanity and making the world a better place to live then harmony cannot be present mentally. The role of environment in attaining mental

health is paramount. In redirecting the client toward a fulfilling life one is teaching them the importance of a holistic approach. A very simplistic example would be if a client were living in an unhealthy situation, perhaps above a club. They need a fair amount of peace in order to study but find it impossible in the current situation.

They then stay out all night at libraries in order to find the peace they need but not getting the rest they need to regenerate with all the traveling. This is an extremely simplistic example illustrating a domino effect. The rest of the client's affairs will start falling apart as they try to keep up with not having had enough sleep. Another little pearl of wisdom here would be " If you keep doing the things you are doing, you will keep on getting the results that you're getting".

Now their motivation for moving away might be that they cannot afford to move away. A suggestion would be to share a residence on a communal basis where the necessary structure is present. A small change, as inconsequential as it may seem, has the power of positivity behind it. It spurs on further change in the " Style of Life". Adler maintained that human beings were born teleological. His primary example being, that of an infant who as a result of its initial helplessness feels inferior and strives to overcome that by developing to a higher level.

Feeling inferior and compensating for that by way of development is the dynamic force behind the motivation, which propels the individual throughout life. This process, as Adler stated, begins in infancy where the child is aware of others who are larger and stronger than they are. In order to survive and attain our goals we must strive forward. Adler described these

as minus situations where children compared themselves to older children or adults. The inferiority feelings then become the motivation for striving towards plus situations.

Adler said that individuals were not always guided in their actions by reality but also by fictitious goals. Hence the Adlerian concept of the final goal, a fictional creation, an imagined ideal situation that guides a person in the present. The final goal is the result of a process that is unique to each individual, a process that Adler calls “ Private Logic”. The process, by which we overcome the obstacles in our way, was coined by Adler as “ Style of Life”. This pattern is generally set by the time we are 6 or 7 years old and is quite difficult to change thereafter.

Using Adler’s definition of 3 broad categories of people in terms of neurosis we will illustrate how these two different types encounter and overcome obstacles. Subject A is a Ruling Type (Dr George C. Boeree (2005). They are from early years characterized by their overwhelming need to win. Subject A’s method of overcoming an obstacle will more than likely be confrontational and aggressive. There is no doubt, however, that this obstacle will be overcome but without regard for the consequences. Subject B is categorized as an Avoiding Type (Dr George C.

Boeree), perhaps self-explanatory. They only live life through avoidance and as a result never actually grow. As a result of this lack of growth, this type may eventually succumb to psychosis and then retreat within themselves. This was a very simplistic example but serves to highlight the extremes between individual responses. An important skill we have from infancy is the ability to elicit care from others. First and foremost an infant is born

physically appealing to its caregiver and has very effective ways of eliciting care.

Crying is the most emotive way of eliciting care and is very seldom ignored. If the crying of an infant carries on for an extended period of time then the adult becomes anxious and panicky. This almost certainly ensures that the infant receives the care it needs. Crying is used throughout our lives as a means of manipulation or eliciting care from others. The basic summation here is that manipulation in any form makes up part of our daily interactions with other people. An example would be a teenager seeking a later curfew, citing their friend curfews as examples.

The Coup de Grace being “ The other parents trust their children” or “ You don’t love me”. Both of these are extremely emotive to parents. Humans by nature are sybaritic and such a sense of community needs to be nurtured and developed throughout their lives. Alfred Adler himself was an early follower of Freud, breaking away later due to the disparities in their particular theories. This perhaps illustrates that there is no holistic method of psychotherapy yet and that perhaps a combination of all the most pertinent types is actually the path one should be following.

This is certainly debatable, especially to devotees of either end of the spectrum. The evidence however points to an infinite spectrum of complexity in the human psyche, one which we are perhaps no closer to approaching with any real insight. The Adlerian theory however was a breakthrough in it’s time with aspects such as labeling us individuals which brought about a more effective approach to psychotherapy. There is no one set way of

treating everyone and the closer to personal the experience of psychotherapy is brought, the closer a solution you get.

This is perhaps a simplistic summary of what is essentially a complex theory with many components but the central theme for Alfred Adler was, unlike Freud, he did not believe that our only drives were basic and animalistic. This is a solid argument based on the fact that we are sentient beings with the ability to reason and therefore are able to direct our destinies to a large degree. The study of human behavior is ongoing; call it a "Work in progress". All theories and studies will have an impact on psychotherapy as we know it, by its very nature continuing to evolve as we do.