

Adlerian Therapy: of “Ordinary People”

Leslie Bae

Mental Health Counseling, Alliance University

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Dr. George J Ramos

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Despite Alfred Adler's involvement in Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic model, Adler branched off to form a less pessimistic and deterministic framework. Individual psychology maintains the importance of the early childhood years with emphasis on the social context, such as birth order and family dynamics, as well as the innate drive to achieve instead of purely biological sexual and aggressive desires. Although Adler emphasizes a reframing and reformation of one's present patterns by a mental manifestation of a positive future, he asserts an inferiority feeling within all of us which motivates "to strive for mastery, competence, of success: a basic striving for "superiority" or perfection" (Tan, 2011, p.61).

Adler's theory became the basis in understanding human behavior in a holistic approach of one's internal "values, beliefs, attitudes, goals, interests, and the individual perception of reality" (Corey, 2015, p. 99) in a relational context. As a result, when it comes to tackling mental disorders the emphasis is on understanding one's lifestyle in relationship to others, especially the tasks of "building friendships (social task), establishing intimacy (love-marriage task), and contributing to society (occupational task)" (Corey, 2015, p.102). Adler defined any impairment in these core milestones as a psychological disorder but if we can fully comprehend and alter the way we think, then our feelings will change accordingly to "effectively navigate each of these life tasks" (Corey, 2015.p.103).

Conrad has a break in his relationships with his family, school friends, and teachers where he behaves in a distant manner to maintain as much normalcy as possible until he is unable to make any genuine connection that he starts to erupt with anger and violence. There is a struggle to appear how other people expect him to be, for instance, snatching a book to when his father walks in (Redford, 1980, 5:33) but an avoidance such as reading "Hardy" in a car with his friends (Redford, 1980, 10:33) or eating lunch by himself on the bleachers (Redford, 1980,

12:27). Immediately after that scene, he calls Dr. Burger, which Adlerian therapy could interpret as Conrad desiring a “sense of belonging” (Corey, 2015. P. 105) free from prying eyes. Since the fundamental need for social task is evident and Adlerian theory does not recognize “emotionally disturbed, but as mainly discouraged” (Corey, 2015. P. 107), Conrad needs to rid the mistaken self-belief of having “hung on” (Redford, 1980, 1:43:52). With the confirmation of Dr. Burger saying they were friends, the “antidote to despair” (Corey, 2015. P. 109), the immediate scene after is Conrad seeking connection with Karen and bravely admitting “I like being with you, I just didn’t like myself” (Redford, 1980, 1:46:23).

As Dr. Burger, it would be important to assess the family dynamic especially since Conrad feels as though his mother “hates me” (Redford, 1980, 1:08:36) and possibly favors Jarrett. Conrad would benefit from getting a better understanding of himself and how his present behavior is dictated by trying to please for his parents for recognition or fear of not meeting expectations, for instance, hiding that he quit the swim team. With a strong therapeutic alliance, Dr. Burger could instill feelings of encouragement, compassion, and “being straight with me” (Redford, 1980, 1:46:58) which is trust without the fake façade but genuineness. That would count as a success in Conrad being able to come out of his self-absorption, change and learn adaptive ways to achieve the goal of true connection with others.

Adlerian therapy would be helpful for Conrad because his goal of interconnectedness is a strong foundation to explore and change his lifestyle behaviors. With the right motivation and Conrad putting that change into action, he will come out of his self-isolation and loathing. However, the extent of how this therapy could have helped Conrad right before he attempted suicide and confronting the pain of his brother’s death might be limited. Denying the diagnosis of suicidal depression and using the techniques like the push-button seems too dangerous.

References

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