Ordinary People Application Paper: Adlerian Therapy

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Being a man far ahead of his time, Alfred Adler founded the Adlerian theory (or *individual psychology*) in the early 1900's, a pioneering approach to psychology and therapy that is optimistic, holistic, subjective, social, goal-oriented, systemic, and humanistic (Corey, 2017). Many of his revolutionary ideas and techniques have since been incorporated into several present-day psychotherapeutic systems, such as existential therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, solution-focused therapy, and family therapy.

Adlerian theory is based on the premise that humans are social beings who are "purposive, self-determining, and striving for growth" (Corey, 2017, p. 126). With innate feelings of inferiority, people are driven to compensate for this sense of helplessness by striving for mastery, success, and fulfillment (Tan, 2011). Along with this drive for significance, human personality development is also shaped by a person's subjective reality- their own way of perceiving, interpreting, and attaching meanings to what they experience (Corey, 2017). This translates into a "*private logic*" with its own core beliefs and assumptions which affects both feelings and behavior. By early childhood, a self-selected life goal (*fictional finalism* or *guiding self-ideal*) to strive toward is formed in the context of their unique experiences in the family and cultural environment. As people are motivated and directed through life toward their life goal, a personal style of living (*lifestyle*) is developed by unifying their personality and core beliefs.

Adlerians believe an important part of being social beings is the human need for social connectedness and a sense of belonging (*community feeling*) (Corey, 2017). People fulfill their need for security, acceptance, and value by seeking a place in their family and community. Therefore, a person's striving and life goal should not only be for themselves but also for the common good of others and the betterment of humanity (*social interest*). As social interest grows, feelings of inferiority and alienation decrease and mental health is bolstered. On the flip side, dysfunction in life occurs when people fear not being accepted by the social groups they value. Due to faulty private logic leading to faulty beliefs and conclusions, this sense of not belonging causes them to adopt a lifestyle toward the *useless side of life* (self-absorption, self-protection, acts against fellow human beings, and withdrawal from the main *life tasks* of friendship, love, and societal contribution), which prevents them from functioning properly. Clients that seek therapy are therefore not seen as psychologically sick or emotionally disturbed but as mainly discouraged.

From an Adlerian viewpoint, Conrad from the movie "Ordinary People" enters counseling as a very discouraged young man lacking in community feeling and struggling with life tasks. His discouragement and no sense of belonging stem from his subjective perception and interpretations of his life experiences within his family system (especially in his relationships with his mother and brother as the second child of two, and his brother's death) which resulted in erroneous core beliefs and assumptions. Some of the false conclusions Conrad makes about himself and the world around him are the

following: he is insignificant and not very capable, he is not worthy of love, nobody cares about him, he must be perfect to be loved and accepted, he is letting everyone down, the world is unfair, unpredictable, and threatening, people are not reliable, and it is not acceptable to have or show feelings. This faulty private logic leads him to be harshly critical and expecting perfection of himself and to feelings of anxiety, rejection, loneliness, and guilt. Oriented to the "useless side of life," he unsuccessfully tries to cope through behaviors of social isolation (keeping to himself and avoiding interactions with school friends), self-harm (suicidal attempt), and an unwillingness to depend on others for psychological support (his initial hesitation to go to therapy and telling Father and friends that he is "fine" when asked) (Redford, 1980).

I think the Adlerian approach will be useful to treat Conrad. Since a big part of his struggles has their roots in his family of origin, an Adlerian exploration of his family constellation and of his birth order can shed light on why he thinks, feels, and behaves as he does now. The warm, empathic, and affirming relationship offered by an Adlerian therapist would also greatly benefit a discouraged Conrad in need of social connectedness and acceptance. Furthermore, this counseling approach would help him identify his self-defeating perceptions and core beliefs as inaccurate and provide him with courage to choose new life goals and create a better way of living (useful side of life) for his own welfare and for the good of others.

While Adlerian therapists employ many counseling techniques, encouragement is by far the most significant because it is the antidote to clients' discouragement in life (Tan, 2011). I will encourage Conrad through mutual respect in our relationship; encourage him to believe that he has the power to change his life and not remain a victim of circumstances; and encourage him by acknowledging and affirming him for each positive step he takes to change his life for the better (i.e. when he talks to his swim coach about quitting the team, asks a girl he likes out on a date, and hugs his mom before going to bed). I hope such encouragement will build Conrad's self-confidence and give him courage to move forward. Another technique I will use is early recollection analysis. Having Conrad recall and share a few stories from his early childhood will help me identify and understand some of the faulty beliefs and convictions that have been guiding his life. I will also assign homework for him to complete between sessions. This will emphasize the active role he plays in therapy and help him to accomplish the tasks he has chosen to do.

References

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