

Adlerian Theory applied to Conrad in Ordinary People

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Adlerian Therapy Overview

Adlerian therapy is built on the concept that an individual must accomplish three fundamental life tasks; that is, establishing friendships, maintaining intimacy, and contributing to society (Corey, 2017). Failure to do so, according to an Adlerian, can be both a source of anxiety, as well as an indication of poor mental health, or even a psychological disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, as cited in Corey, 2017, p. 102).

As we can read from the descriptions, these three fundamental life tasks are all rooted in establishing and maintaining strong social contracts, which is a defining characteristic at the heart of Adlerian therapy. The underlying principle is that people who are able to maintain social connections have been able to turn their feelings of inferiority into a motivator to strive for increasingly higher levels of development and positively direct their energy toward the socially beneficial side of life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964 as cited in Corey, 2017, p. 99).

Another defining characteristic of Adlerian therapy is the significance placed on an individual's birth order or perception of it. (On a personal note, my oldest stepson was adopted into my ex-husband's family after two of his brothers had been born. Even though he was chronologically the oldest, the next oldest son was always asked to organize and shepherd his brothers, and, was generally treated as the oldest. So, the concept of perceived birth order resonates with me).

The perceived birth order, in addition to early recollections gathered during a lifestyle assessment, are key ways that an Adlerian therapist can build a phenomenological frame of reference for their client. Understanding their client's "subjective reality" and "private logic" helps the therapist interpret underlying motives for their client's behaviors.

As a therapist starts to form a holistic view of their client, they would then move into what is considered the third phase of therapy and collaborate with their client to help them uncover sometimes-unconscious motives underpinning their behaviors. Finally, in the final phase of therapy, a therapist would reorient and encourage their client to form more positive social contracts, achieve their three fundamental tasks, and pursue their life's ambitions based on the insights they gained in the earlier phases of therapy, (Corey, 2017).

Application

In the case of Conrad in “Ordinary People”, we can see that there could be many benefits from utilizing an Adlerian therapeutic approach.

Conrad is struggling with feelings of guilt following the accidental death of his older brother and is recently out of rehab from his subsequent suicide attempt. We see that Conrad has an awkward and tense relationship with his mother and seems to have absorbed feelings of inadequacy from their dynamic. Conrad also prefers to avoid maintaining a relationship with a mutual friend of his brothers, as it is “too painful”. So, it is clear that Conrad is not fulfilling his social contracts or the fundamental life tasks deemed important to an Adlerian therapist.

Similar to what the therapist did in the movie, I would build a rapport with Conrad, and then conduct both a subjective and an objective survey to help create a “family constellation” to better understand his individual psychology and help him see some of the mistakes in his “private logic”. Over time, I would share with him how birth order can influence the dynamic of his brother being the favored son and ask him to reflect on how he thinks this affected his own feelings of inferiority. Ultimately, I would work with Conrad to recognize his strengths and help him reestablish his social constructs in a way that works for him.

Techniques

In addition to the aforementioned approach to applying Adlerian therapy, I would consider the pragmatic technique of asking questions, as the therapist did to great effect in the movie. At one point, he asks Conrad questions that challenge his private logic, e.g., “How can your dad love you if you are a rotten kid”? and “Oh, I get it, he loves you, but he’s wrong”. Also, “Did you ever consider that perhaps you were stronger?” (Ordinary People, 1980).

Other techniques that could be considered and that we did see utilized by the movie’s therapist include humor, silence, acting as if, avoiding the traps, use of stories and fables, early

recollection analysis, lifestyle assessment, encouraging, giving homework, and summarizing (Carlson & Johnson, 2016, as cited in Corey, 2017, p. 117).

Benefits

As Conrad becomes more aware of the emotional limitations of his mother, instead of just internalizing that he alone is at fault, he starts to attempt new and productive ways of maintaining a relationship with her by giving her a hug. He also is starting to navigate a potentially intimate relationship with a girl at school.

You can see that Conrad is not reevaluating how he wants to spend his time socially, e.g., with the swim team, and/or with the pretty young classmate.

We have no doubt by the end of the film that Conrad is becoming more comfortable in his own skin, and in his relationships with others, and we expect that he will be successful in finding ways to make his place in the world.

References

Redford, R. (1980), *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprises Inc.

Corey G., (2017). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (10th ed.). Cengage Learning