

Adlerian Therapy Ordinary People Paper

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GCN 502: Theories and Foundations of Counseling

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February 19th, 2023

Alfred Adler was a physician, psychotherapist, and the founder of the school of individual psychology, also known as Adlerian psychology or indivisible psychology. His theoretical approach stemmed from the idea that a person should be understood as a whole and not in reductionist divisions like Freud did. Adler stressed the unity and indivisibility of the person and the importance of understanding the whole person in the context of his or her life — how a person’s intricacies are interconnected parts and how the pursuit of a life goal unites these parts of the person as a whole. Individual psychology is based on the concept of holism, which suggests that we cannot be understood in parts; rather, it is necessary to understand every aspect of who we are in connection to the social contexts of our families, cultures, communities, and our jobs. There is more emphasis on interpersonal relationships than on the individual’s internal psychodynamics (Corey, 2015). Adler’s individual psychology is a phenomenological approach, meaning it is an attempt to see the world through the client’s “subjective reality,” in other words, their experience of their world, taking into account their observations, thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, convictions, and conclusions (Corey, 2015).

Individual psychology also provides a teleological explanation of human behavior which assumes that all human behavior has a purpose and is goal-oriented, meaning we can only think, feel, and behave in relation to our purpose, aspirations, and what we’re striving towards. Adler also emphasized social interests. He believed that it embodies a sense of belonging and the ability to work together and contribute to something greater than oneself. He also believed that mental health is measured by the degree to which we care about the welfare of others and share with others. Lastly, social interest is expressed through shared activities, cooperation, participation in the common good, and mutual respect (Corey, 2015). Adler’s individual psychology also focused on birth order and siblings’ relationships and how that can give an

individual a unique psychological set of experiences. In addition, Adler believed that therapy involves teaching, informing, and encouraging, and it considers basic mistakes in the client's private logic. Lastly, he believed that the therapeutic relationship is a collaborative partnership.

In the film *Ordinary People*, Conrad (the main character) is experiencing the tragic and traumatic loss of his older brother Buck who passed away in a boat accident. It left Conrad scarred and traumatized to the point of attempting to commit suicide. It was clear that Conrad was showing signs of survivor's guilt and dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to being directly exposed to the traumatic event. Conrad's symptoms in the film were recurring nightmares and flashbacks, lack of motivation, sleep, and interest in normal activities, loss of appetite, difficulty focusing on class, and feeling isolated and alone. Through the lens of the Adlerian theory, much of what Conrad had been experiencing in relation to his parents, specifically his mother, could be due to his birth order (being the second child). After losing his older brother, he struggled to reconnect with his mother, who seemed distant and cold with him. It seemed as though she had a close relationship with her eldest son Buck compared to her youngest, Conrad, and after losing Buck, she finds herself struggling to connect with her second child/son and show him love and affection. According to Adler, by the time the second child is born, they share the attention with another child and are made to feel as though they're in a race and under full steam at all times to surpass the older sibling. It is almost as if they're in competition with one another and, as a result, come out to be the complete opposite of each other.

The experiences Conrad had with his mother after losing his brother made him feel frustrated, inadequate, not good enough, misunderstood, and alone as though he could not live up to his parent's expectations or fill the void and emptiness they were feeling. This, in turn, only

compounds Conrad's guilt and sense of worthlessness. In the film, Conrad also struggles with his perception of the tragic event that led to his brother's death. Adler would have called it Conrad's "subjective reality." Conrad's perception of what happened during the boat accident that took his brother's life only made him feel worse and tormented. He felt immense guilt because he thought he could save his brother but didn't. Conrad's therapist, Dr. Burger, in the film offered some insight and interpretation which helped him see his experience differently and more logically, which gave Conrad some peace and closure because he realized there was nothing he could do that could've prevented his brother from losing his life and that he was not at fault or in control of that situation. In other words, his experiences and reality did not have to define who he was because his perception of the situation changed.

If I were Dr. Burger treating Conrad, I would use Adler's externalization, encouragement, and immediacy techniques. Conrad was dealing with low self-esteem, loneliness, and guilt from his brother's passing, and encouragement would help him in the areas of confidence, self-worth, and significance. It can help me build a close, respectful, empathetic, and harmonious relationship with Conrad. This technique will also help Conrad distinguish between who they are and what they do. It will also help Conrad form alternative perceptions or beliefs for negative, discouraging, untrue, and oppressive beliefs/narratives about himself and his situation. Externalization would help Conrad detach himself from the issues (deconstruct) he is facing and, ultimately, renegotiate his connection with those issues. Externalizing can help Conrad gain a better perspective on his issues by separating himself from his issues rather than personalizing. This technique will also aid in altering Conrad's negative thought pattern. Immediacy can help Conrad talk about what he is feeling and experiencing at the present moment. As a result, Conrad will be in a position conducive to reorienting himself to a greater understanding of his situation. I

believe Adlerian's therapeutic techniques and approach can be helpful to Conrad's situation because their objectives include building a trusting/amicable client/counselor relationship, increasing social interests/social awareness, altering self-destructive thought patterns and behaviors, forming cohesive relationships, and improving problem-solving techniques.

References

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