Alfred Adler Counseling Theory

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Abstract

Counseling is a social science in which one undertakes a journey of self-exploration with the aim of increasing their level of self-awareness and self-understanding, usually with the help of a counselor. Counselling science in general relays the philosophy that every client has the answers to their problems, issues or dilemmas and it is the work of a therapist to make the answers to such problems explicit. A counselor achieves the goal of getting a client in touch with their inner self by forming a relationship based on a personal theory or philosophy adopted by the counselor. Whichever counseling approach used, a counselor must have a thorough knowledge of their theoretical orientation, have excellent communication and psychiatric skills as well as an understanding of the theory concerning the application. Alfred Adler Counseling Theory is one of the most common methods of counseling and, therefore, this research paper seeks to describe, analyze and reflect on the theory. The research will focus on the key concepts and techniques, examine the application to school counseling practice, analyze the limitations, outline cultural relevance and reflect on the key elements that practitioners apply to personal, professional practice.

*Key words:*Alfred Adler counseling theory, description, concepts, techniques, analysis

**Description of Alfred Adler Counselling Theory**

            The pioneer of Adlerian psychology, Alfred Adler, began his career as an ophthalmologist in 1895 before developing an interest in the world of psychiatry in the early 1900s (Adler Graduate School, 2017). Adler was intrigued by Sigmund Freud’s theories of human behavior, which prompted Freud to invite Adler into his inner circle in 1907. The two founded psychoanalysis movement but later differed on theoretical approaches which motivated Adler to develop his emerging strategy known as Individual Psychology. The central theme of individual psychology, or Adlerian psychology, was a goal-oriented study of human behavior to understand a person’s character. Adler pushed for the institutionalization of his theory until it received admittance into The Society of Free Psychological Thought, hence the birth of Alfred Adler Counseling Theory or Adlerian Theory (Jones-Smith, 2011).

            The contextual development of Adlerian approach is the idea of a holistic personal growth where the counselor emphasizes on a person’s ability to accept and adapt to the feelings of inferiority or inadequacy with relation to others. According to Adler, senses of inadequacy are as a result of birth orders where a person was devalued at an early age and experienced physical humiliation leading to the lack of social empathy for other people (Jones-Smith, 2011). Adler developed the theory with the philosophy that a person is more responsive to the feeling of adequacy and self-respect when they are encouraged. Conversely, discouragement in a person’s journey of life breeds counter productivity characterized by defeat, competition, and withdrawal. According to Jones-Smith (2011), the Adlerian theory pays particular attention to a person’s belief systems and behavioral patterns formed during childhood.

**Concepts of Alfred Adler Counseling Theory**

            Adler believed that children associated their significance with their personal struggles and their family constellations. Jones-Smith (2011) writes that Adler also found that a counselor should not view a client as different parts of a whole but as a complete unity i.e. a holistic approach. To stress on the indivisibility of a person as a unit, Adler founded the theory of personality on the following concepts.

            Firstly, the Adlerian concept of Social Interest refers to an individual’s need to feel like part of a larger community so that they can develop a sense of belonging and contribution. The development of one’s unique character and emotions heavily depends on the relationship they have with the community. For example, if a child gains acceptance in the society, they develop the ability to empathize with others i.e. “to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another and to feel with the heart of another.” (Jones-Smith, 2011).

            The second concept of Adlerian psychology is Feelings of Inferiority. Adler was of the opinion that every human development journey begins with a sense of inadequacy or inferiority due to the dependence on others for survival. Inferiority complex is when a person views his abilities as less adequate compared to those of other individuals. For example, a child may consider himself less athletic or intelligent compared to his siblings. The result is a personal presentation of a weak character incapable of handling problems in the society. The feelings of inferiority should be used to propel growth and development (Jones-Smith, 2011).

            Thirdly, individuals try to compensate any feelings of inadequacy by striving for superiority. Striving for Superiority enables a person to overcome obstacles, gain power and status, conquer self-doubts and arrive at a positive state. Adler insisted on the importance of distinguishing striving for superiority and a superiority complex. While striving for superiority does not mask the feelings of inferiority but strives to achieve perfection positively, a superiority complex is a negative trait where a person inflates their self-importance to hide insecurities (Jones-Smith, 2011). A skilled Adlerian counselor should distinguish the two concepts.

            Fourthly, essential to Adler’s theory was goal orientation. The growth and forward movement of life is a future-oriented strive towards a fictional goal one sets consciously or unconsciously. People who are mentally healthy strive towards a realistic goal of achieving useful social significance or overcoming the inferior qualities. Individuals who are mentally unhealthy, like those who seek psychiatric services, often have unrealistic goals of exaggerated importance of being superior to others. According to Jones-Smith (2011), Adler’s research found out that the depth of inferiority correlates to the height of the goal.

            Fifthly, an individual’s determination and uniqueness are crucial to the formation, achievement or failure of the fictional goals. While family constellations, genetic factors, and cultural background may influence a person’s fictional goals, the creative power is the base of which one forms a target.

            The sixth concept of Adler psychology was the basis for disagreement between Adler and Sigmund Freud. Adler believed that the unity of an individual was crucial to the healing of any problems in a person’s development. Thoughts, feelings, emotions and behavior determine a person’s lifestyle. Different parts don't make a person, but each entity and every personality point contribute to the whole (Adler Graduate School, 2017).

            Finally, mental health is the mission concept of Adlerian counseling. The theory enables one to gain connectedness and a will to develop oneself to contribute to the welfare of others.

**Techniques and Procedures of Adlerian Theory**

            There are four phases of the therapeutic process that cater for four primary objectives of Adlerian counseling (Corey, 2012). The stages are not linear but are interwoven to achieve maximum results. Firstly, an Adlerian counselor should establish a proper therapeutic relationship with the client. Adlerian therapist develops a person-to-person contact with an individual instead of beginning with a definition of the issues at hand. The Adlerian creates a relationship by listening to the client with the aim of responding appropriately which shows respect and understanding.

            Secondly, an Adlerian practitioner should explore an individual’s psychological dynamics through a proper assessment. The assessment should not box the client into a preconceived model but should focus on understanding the social and cultural context of an individual. An assessment helps gain insight into a person’s symptoms, actions, difficulties and complexes (Corey, 2012).

            The third technique involves a practitioner interpreting the findings of the assessment through the encouragement of self-understanding and insight. For example, a counselor can use appropriate disclosures and answers to questions to help the client gain insight into the problem. Conversation in the third phase begins with phrases such as “Could it be that...” or “I could be wrong, but I am wondering…” (Corey, 2012).

            The final phase is where the therapist employs the skills and personal knowledge of Adlerian counseling theory to reorient and re-educate the client. Corey (2012) writes that to achieve the task, the therapist engages the customer in ways in which they can make new choices, develop good habits and set goals to eliminate dangerous trends.

**Analysis of Alfred Adlerian Counseling Theory**

**Application to Counseling Practice**

            The ultimate objective of Adlerian-based therapy is to attain high levels of self-knowledge and genuine feelings of self-worth. At the same time, an Adlerian therapist helps the client eliminate the exaggerated sense of self-protection and inferiority complex and re-educate them on ways of striving for superiority over challenges and pre-formed false notions. Adlerian practitioners apply counseling practice on various fronts.

            Firstly, individual therapy procedures employ the techniques and concepts discussed above to achieve the desired results. The structure of Adlerian individual therapy is broken down into five phases which range from the relational understanding between the therapist and the client to reorientation and formation of new habits to curb the problem. A post-therapy follow-up period follows the steps, and each stage is broken into smaller pieces to enhance efficiency (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Each stage has goals for clients and therapist to achieve as well as goals to be achieved together.

            Secondly, the Adlerian approach is used in teaching programs to increase the teacher-student cooperation in classrooms. Different stakeholders such as teachers, parents, school administrators attend sessions that teach on how to improve the effectiveness of learning by children, encourage openness and learn how to better handle children and any arising issues (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

            The third application is arguably the most common in today’s psychological use, i.e. couple-enrichment programs. With the rising number of divorce cases the world over, most couples seek therapy to save marriages and enhance communication. The optimistic and openness approach of Adlerian therapy are essential to assess couple problems and encourage dialogue. Classical Adlerian psychotherapy trains couples in groups of 10 and engages them in role playing, social exercises, and teamwork drills to create trust between spouses and watching videos (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

            Family and parental programs make good use of Adlerian techniques and therapeutic procedures to build better family relationships.

**Limitations of Alfred Adler Counseling Theory**

            The first and the greatest shortcoming of Adlerian approach to therapy is the difficulty to learn. For example, interpreting dreams proves dream therapy to be difficult and often inaccurate. Secondly, according to Oberst & Stewart (2003), Adlerian therapy may not be suitable for a person looking for a quick solution to their concerns since it takes a lot of time.   Thirdly, the dependence of treatment on revisiting and examining early childhood behavior can render progress ineffective since most people rarely like to explore or reveal family history. Fourthly, supporters of Adlerian therapy find that the approach works best with individuals who are engaging and more talkative and, therefore, critics are of the opinion that those who are less verbal do not benefit from the approach (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Finally, Adlerian practitioners do not like to make a diagnosis, a concept which some critics use to disqualify the effectiveness of the approach in issues such as mental illness.

**Reflection on Adlerian Theory**

**Elements used in personal Professional Practice**

            Firstly, the Adlerian theory was the first approach to attempt the explanation of mental disorders in psychological terms. The psychological explanation of mental health problems has had enormous influence in the understanding and treatment of patients in counseling practice at both school and professional level. For example, psychoanalysis aspect of Adlerian theory aims to make the unconscious material conscious so as to enable understanding. The application gained support from a 1999 study in which Adlerian theory analyzed symptoms of 756 patients, and after three years of therapy, the symptoms had reduced significantly (Corey, 2012).

            Secondly, Corey (2012) is of the opinion that schools and other fields of practice can apply the philosophies of Alfred Adler to explain and predict adult personality based on the elements of early childhood experiences, early relationships, and lifestyle. For example, fixations are developed by individuals as a result of separation from the primary caregiver during early development stages.

            Thirdly, the element of sibling rivalry explained in family constellations can be used to counsel young adults and siblings especially in places like Europe and North America where competition is a fundamental component of getting ahead, hence multicultural relevance(Corey, 2012). For example, the Adlerian theory is useful to treat the element of inferiority complex in shorter basketball players who might have aspirations to play in professional leagues like the NBA.

            Fourthly, the element of encouragement can help Adlerian theory gain traction in Asian and Hispanic cultures like in school communities where collaboration and togetherness are encouraged as opposed to the western world where people are inclined to individualism (Corey, 2012). For example, K-12 schooling systems can use encouragement to help students understand themselves regarding their orientation such as sexual orientation.

            Fifthly, Adlerian therapy can be used to treat specific mental disorders such as social anxiety, conduct disorders, and personality disorders imagined or real. For example, most students have challenges engaging with the public due to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) which therapists can cure by using the techniques of Adlerian therapy.

            Adlerian theory is not limited to a particular population but applies to diverse population. Therapists specializing in child psychology and specialists of adult psychiatry use Adlerian therapy to release unproductive feelings and refocus attention on forming correct values, attitudes, and behaviors that promote cohesive relationships and further positive growth. For instance, most therapists use Adlerian approach to solving issues related to couples therapy, brief therapy, psychotherapy and family therapy (Adler Graduate School, 2017). It is important to note that Adlerian theory has convergent views with other approaches such as Socratic dialogue and Dream Therapy by Sigmund Freud.

**Conclusion**

            Alfred Adler developed a psychotherapy approach that revolutionized the field of psychiatry by implementing techniques based on a client-oriented therapy. The application in school and professional practice has proven useful despite the few minor challenges. Alfred Adler was optimistic in general and his character contributed immensely to the positive response to his philosophy. Adlerian therapy is crucial for enhancing childhood development and attaining maximum self-mastery for adults.

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