Adlerian Theory

Aarin Bell
Alfred Adler, the founder of the Adlerian (or Individual) Theory once said, “Every individual represents a unity of personality and the individual then fashions that unity. The individual is thus both the picture and the artist. Therefore if one can change one’s concept of self, they can change the picture being painted.” Adlerian Theory is a cognitive, goal-oriented, social psychology, which is based on a humanist model of man. There are six concepts that make up the Adlerian theory, among them are striving for success or superiority, subjective perception, unity and self-consistency, social interest, style of life, and creative power.

The first tenet of the Adlerian Theory is striving for success or superiority, which essentially means that the one dynamic force behind people’s behavior is striving for success or superiority. Adler believed that because people are born with small and therefore inferior bodies, they feel inferior and attempt to overcome the feelings through their natural tendency to move toward completion of what Adler calls a “final goal.” This striving force can take one of two routes for people: personal gain (superiority) or community benefit (success). According to Adler, an individual striving for personal gain is considered unhealthy as they have little or no concern for other people and are therefore considered “useless” in society, whereas an individual striving for the success of all humanity would be considered healthy as they do so naturally.

Adler’s second tenet of the Adlerian Theory is subjective perception, which is the belief that an individuals subjective perceptions shape their behavior and personality. As mentioned previously, Adler believed people strive for superiority or success to compensate for feelings of inferiority, but the manner in which they strive is not shaped by reality but rather by their subjective perceptions of reality, that is by their fictions, or expectations of the future. (Adler: Individual Psychology, pg. 73) In other words, a person’s fictions can become reality and in some cases become many people’s realities. Adler’s ideas on factionalism originated from the book The Philosophy of “As If” where the author believed that fictions are ideas that have no real existence, yet they influence people as if they really existed. One example of this could be: “Men are superior to women.” Even though we can say this statement is false, many men and women believe it to be true and live by it. What is meant by this is that perception is only an interpretation of sensory assumptions and these interpretations can differ wildly between individuals. Another
example of this is if a college student’s record player was stolen. He could call the police and describe the lost record player as “brown”. The record player might not ever be found because it was actually “red” because the student did not know that he was colorblind. Adler’s factionalism is consistent with his teleological view of motivation. Adler believed that people are motivated by present perceptions of the future and as fictions, these perceptions need not be conscious or understood. He believed that each person strives to become more perfect and this is their master motive.

Adler’s third tenet of the Adlerian Theory is the unity and self-consistency of personality, which suggests each person is unique and indivisible and that the notion of inconsistent behavior does not exist. Thus, the whole individual strives in a self-consistent way towards a single goal, and all separate actions and functions can be understood as parts of this goal. (Psychodynamic Theories, pg. 74) The disturbance of one part of the body cannot be viewed in isolation, as it affects the entire body; Adler referred to this as “Organ Dialect.” Through Organ Dialect, a person’s body could speak their individual opinion through movement or action, rather than through speech. One example of organ dialect is the case of a very obedient boy who wet the bed at night to send a message that he does not wish to obey parental wishes. His behavior is “really a creative expression, for the child is speaking with his bladder instead of his mouth” (Adler: Individual Psychology, pg. 75).

Adler’s fourth tenet of the Adlerian Theory is the value of all human activity must be seen from the viewpoint of social interest. Social interest comes from the German word “Germeinschaftgefühl,” which means “community feeling.” An individual’s life style in terms of their community can either be “useful” or “useless.” A “useful” person has a social interest in the community around them whereas a “useless” person does not and is only concerned with oneself. Most individuals have the potential of social interest, as it is a natural condition of the human species, which is why we live in groups for most if not all of our lives. Social interest is formed through the relationship between mother and child during early infancy and continues to develop through early childhood because of continued parental relationships.

Adler’s fifth tenant is a self-consistent personality structure develops into a person’s style of life. The style of life refers to the flavor of a person’s life, which
includes a person’s goal, self-concept, feelings for others, and attitudes towards the world. Adler believed the style of one’s life is the product of interaction of heredity, environment, and a person’s creative power. Adler described the style of life as “the separate notes of a composition are meaningless without the entire melody, but the melody takes on added significance when we recognize the composer’s style or unique manner of expression.” Again, an individual that leads a healthy or “useful” life has a style of life that is complex, enriched and changing while an individual that leads an unhealthy or “useless” life is inflexible and dull in their actions.

Creative Power is Adler’s final tenet. Creative power is ones style of life, which is molded by an individual’s creative power. Adler believed that people are much more than a product of their environment and heredity, and that creative power places the responsibility for the individual’s personality into his or her own hands. Adler used “the law of the low doorway” analogy to describe creative power: if you are trying to walk through a doorway four feet high, you have two basic choices. First, you can use your creative power to bend down as you approach the doorways, thereby successfully solving the problem. This is the manner in which the psychologically healthy individual solves most of life’s problems. Conversely, if you bump your head and fall back, you must still solve the problem correctly or continue bumping your head. Neurotics often choose to bump their head on the realities of life. When approaching the low doorway, you are neither compelled to stoop nor forced to bump your head. You have a creative power that permits you to follow either course.

The theory behind change in Adlerian theory is based on changing the client’s beliefs by reorienting the client’s view of situations and relationships. A holistic approach is taken in order to assess the client to the best of the therapist’s ability and form a relationship based on mutual trust between the therapist and the client. Once those things are accomplished, the reeducation can begin. “The main aim of therapy is to develop the client’s sense of belonging and to assist in the adaption of behaviors and processes by increasing the client’s self-awareness and challenging and modifying his or her fundamental premise, life goals, and basic concepts.” (Theravive, 2012).

Alder was ahead of his time in respect to social equality and the cultural considerations. “Adlerian counseling takes into account to social and cultural values of
minority groups, such as social embeddings, integration of family members, and spirituality into the counseling process.” (Bornsheuer, & Polonyi, 2011). Though the Adlerian Theory typically fits cross-cultural situations, there can be limitations based on the client’s experience and how deeply rooted their cultural beliefs are. According to a review done by Arciniega and Newton (1995) using 11 racial and ethnic considerations, the Adlerian theory rated positively on 7 of the 11 considerations, partially addressed three others, and did not address one at all. Additionally, Martin Luther King Jr. referenced Adler’s work in one of his best-known speeches, “The Drum Major Instinct.” In doing so, Dr. King gave credit for the way this noted psychoanalyst explains the process that enables people to successfully move beyond a pervasive sense of inferiority and dependence to an increased and healthy sense of personal distinction and self-worth when opportunities are available for them to do so. (Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Multicultural Perspective, pg. 151)

There are 4 phases in applying the Adlerian Theory. Phase 1 requires establishing a relationship by working collaboratively with the client by being involved, supportive and caring. Phase 2 requires subjective and objective interviews to fully understand the individual’s dynamics. It is also beneficial to understand the individual’s family constellation. Phase 3 helps the client understand motivation their life, understand how they are contributing to their problem, and making adjustments to correct the situation. The last phase, phase 4 helps the client by reorienting. (Classical Adlerian Theory & Practice)

Due to Adler’s lack of organization, much of his writing and work originally was hard to follow. Since his death, more research has been done to support the effectiveness of the theory and because of that, the Adlerian Theory has evolved in many ways. Because the theory requires time to build relationships and trust, it has limited use for clients seeking immediate solutions to their problems and does not allow time for understanding the clients “life style.”


