

Entering the New Millennium: Is Individual Psychology Still Relevant?

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Abstract

The author discusses the similarity and compatibility between Individual Psychology and (a) current and near-future expectations of the psychotherapeutic field, (b) contemporary models of counseling and psychotherapy, and (c) multicultural applications. The relevance of Individual Psychology as a therapeutic approach for use in the 21st century is strongly affirmed.

Prochaska and Norcross (1994) presented the results of a Delphi study that asked 75 "experts" to suggest "what's hot and what's not" as we approached the new millennium.

In terms of interventions and modalities, the consensus is that psychotherapy will become more directive, psychoeducational, present-centered, problem-focused, and briefer in the next decade. Concomitantly, aversive, relatively unstructured, historically oriented, and long-term approaches are predicted to decrease. In terms of therapy formats, individual, couples, family, and group therapy are seen as continuing their upward swing, but the huge transformation is expected in the length of therapy: short-term is in, and long-term is on its way out. In terms of theoretical orientations, integrative, eclectic, systems, and cognitive persuasions will thrive, but classic psychoanalysis, humanistic, and existentialism will not. (p. 486)

Adlerian Therapy and the New Millennium

Anyone conversant with Individual Psychology will marvel at the similarity between the above description of the current/near-future state of the psychotherapy field and the Adlerian perspective. Adlerian psychotherapy is a psychoeducational, present/future-oriented, and time-limited (or brief) approach. In addition, Adlerian psychotherapy, albeit theoretically consistent, is both integrative and eclectic, and it clearly integrates cognitive and systemic perspectives and solidly resonates with postmodern ones.

Psychoeducational, present/future-oriented, brief/time-limited. Adlerian psychotherapy is an integration of cognitive, psychodynamic, and systemic

perspectives. Consequently, it remarkably resembles many contemporary cognitive and constructive approaches (Sperry, 1993, 1997; Shulman & Watts, 1997; Watts, 1999). Unfortunately, many “secondary source” textbooks have provided erroneous presentations of Individual Psychology. For example, Adler’s theory is often incorrectly described as “neo-Freudian” and placed alongside discussions of other psychoanalytic theories.

Many practitioners and educators—as well as managed care boards—may be unaware that Individual Psychology is a psychoeducational, present/future-oriented, and brief approach. However, our own literature clearly demonstrates this point (e.g., Ansbacher, 1972; Dinkmeyer, 1991; Dinkmeyer & Sherman, 1989; Evans, 1989; Kern, Yeakle, & Sperry, 1989; Manaster & Corsini, 1982; Maniacci, 1996; Mosak, 1995; Nicoll, 1999; Nystul, 1999; Shulman, 1989; Sperry, 1989; Watts, 1998, 1999). For example, Mosak described Adlerian psychotherapy as a psychoeducational model in which change occurs through reeducation of “the lifestyle and the relationship to the life tasks” (p. 67). In addition, both Nicoll (1999) and I (1999) have noted that Adler was an early proponent of time-limited therapy and that the techniques used by many contemporary brief approaches to counseling are similar or identical to ones created by or commonly used by Adlerian practitioners.

Cognitive. That Individual Psychology has substantial common ground with the cognitive-behavioral approaches is well documented. Both Adlerian psychotherapists and cognitive-behavioral therapists have contributed to a large body of literature acknowledging the similarity and integrative compatibility between rational-emotive-behavioral therapy, cognitive therapy, and Adlerian therapy (e.g., Beck, 1976; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979; Beck & Weishaar, 1989; Corey, 1991; Dowd & Kelly, 1980; Dryden & Ellis, 1987; Ellis, 1970, 1973, 1989; Freeman, 1981, 1983; Freeman & Urschel, 1997; Mosak & Maniacci, 1999; Raimy, 1975; Shulman, 1985; Sperry, 1997; Watts & Critelli, 1997). For example, both Adlerian psychotherapy and contemporary cognitive-behavioral approaches emphasize the importance of reconstructing/restructuring maladaptive cognitions within the context of a supportive therapeutic alliance.

Systemic. There is ample literature discussing the similarity and integrative compatibility of Adlerian therapy and family systems approaches. Adlerian practitioners and family systems therapists (to a far lesser degree) have both contributed to this body of literature (e.g., Broderick & Schrader, 1991; Carich & Willingham, 1987; Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 1999; Carlson, Sperry, & Lewis, 1997; Christensen, 1993; Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987; Evans & Milliren, 1999; Kern, Hawes, & Christensen, 1989; LaFountain & Mustaine, 1998; Nichols & Schwartz, 1995; Sherman, 1999; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987; Sperry, 1986; Sperry & Carlson, 1991). For example, Carlson et al. and Sherman noted that Individual Psychology’s emphasis on holism, nonlinearity,

cognition, purposeful or goal-directed behavior, and social-embeddedness clearly parallels systemic perspectives.

Both individuals and social systems are holistic, and individuals seek significance by the manner of their behavior in social systems. The basic social system is the family. It is from the family that individuals learn how to belong and interact. (Carlson et al., p. 42)

Postmodern Approaches

The relationship between three popular postmodern approaches—constructivist therapy, solution-focused brief therapy, and narrative therapy—and Individual Psychology has been addressed to varying degrees in the literature. Substantial common ground between the postmodern therapies and Individual Psychology has been demonstrated.

Constructivist Therapy. Individual Psychology and constructivist theory both affirm that humans are creative agents in the construction of their own personalities and the subsequent perceptions and interpretations of themselves, others, and the world (Carlson & Sperry, 1998; Watts & Critelli, 1997).

Human beings live in the realm of *meanings*. We do not experience things in the abstract; we always experience them in human terms. Even at its source our experience is qualified by our human perspective. . . . Anyone who tried to consider circumstances, to the exclusion of meanings, would be very unfortunate: he would isolate himself from others and his actions would be useless to himself or to anyone else; in a word, they would be meaningless. But no human being can escape meanings. We experience reality only through the meaning we ascribe to it: not as a thing in itself, but as something interpreted. (Adler, 1931/1992, p. 15)

According to Carlson and Sperry, the realization that individuals co-construct the *reality* in which they live and that they are also able to “question, deconstruct, or reconstruct reality for themselves” is a fundamental tenet “not only of Adlerian psychotherapy but also of other constructivist psychotherapies” (p. 68).

Literature addressing the similarity and potential for integration between Adlerian and constructivist therapies has grown in recent years. Michael Mahoney and Robert Neimeyer, both well-known constructivists, are willing to acknowledge Adler’s Individual Psychology as a *protoconstructivist* theory (Watts, 1999). However, constructivists, in the main, have been reluctant to acknowledge similarities, and Adlerian researchers have contributed the majority of the comparative literature (e.g., Carlson & Sperry, 1998; Forgas & Shulman, 1979; Jones, 1995; Jones & Lyddon, 1997; Mahoney, 1984, 1991;

Master, 1991; Scott, Kelly, & Tolbert, 1995; Shulman, 1985; Shulman & Watts, 1997; Watts, 1999; Watts & Critelli, 1997).

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. I (1999) reviewed the literature written by proponents of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) and found no substantive mention of Individual Psychology. Nevertheless, a wealth of common ground between the two approaches has been identified (LaFountain, 1996; LaFountain & Garner, 1999; Watts 1999; Watts & Pietrzak, in press). For example, Watts and Pietrzak identified a striking resemblance between the assumptions and characteristics of *encouragement* as used in Individual Psychology and the therapeutic process of SFBT.

Narrative Therapy. A review of narrative therapy literature, as with solution-focused brief therapy, produced no mention of Individual Psychology (Watts, 1999). However, in a recent special issue of *The Journal of Individual Psychology* (Schneider & Stone, 1998) titled "Narrative Therapy and Adlerian Psychology," authors do identify substantial common ground between the two approaches. For example, narrative and Adlerian approaches "resonate on the issue of social constructionism" (p. 414), and they share common therapeutic methods, albeit with different nomenclature. Daigneault (1999) identified theoretical similarities and technical congruencies between Adlerian therapy and narrative therapy within the context of designing interventions for school-age children.

Entering the New Millennium: A Multicultural Addendum

The research presented by Prochaska and Norcross (1994) appears to be, for the most part, congruent with the demands of managed care and supported by contemporary outcome research (Friedman, 1997; Hoyt, 1995; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999; Sauber, 1997; Sexton, Whiston, Bleuer, & Walz, 1997). Brief, time-limited therapies are and apparently will continue to be in demand. However, one important issue the research did not address is that of multicultural considerations in counseling. The demographics of North America—especially the United States—are changing at an exponential rate. Thus, if any therapeutic approach is to be considered relevant in the new millennium, it must successfully address multicultural and social equality issues. How relevant is Individual Psychology in this regard?

In an invited commentary to a 1991 special issue of the *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* titled "Macrostrategies in Mental Health Counseling," Corey stated:

The basic assumptions of all these authors [Herr, Ivey, Rigazio-DiGilio, and Dinkmeyer] appear to rest on an Adlerian foundation that stresses prevention, policies that are growth producing, visions that inspire individuals to feel com-

petent, the process of reaching out to others, and finding meaning and a sense of community in a social context . . . From my vantage point, Adler's ideas are certainly compatible with many of the macrostrategies for future delivery of services to culturally diverse populations. (cited in Sweeney, 1998, pp. 33–34)

Similarly, Arciniega and Newlon (1999) stated that the contemporary counseling theory holding the greatest promise for addressing multicultural issues is Individual Psychology. They noted that the characteristics and assumptions of Individual Psychology are congruent with the cultural values of minority racial and ethnic groups. In addition, Arciniega and Newlon affirmed that the Adlerian therapeutic process is respectful of cultural diversity.

Adlerian goals are not aimed at deciding for clients what they should change about themselves. Rather, the practitioner works in collaboration with clients and their family networks. This theory offers a pragmatic approach that is flexible and uses a range of action-oriented techniques to explore personal problems within their sociocultural context. It has the flexibility to deal both with the individual and the family, making it appropriate for racial and ethnic groups. (p. 451)

Practitioners of Individual Psychology have addressed social equality issues and the sociocultural context of understanding humankind long before multiculturalism became chic in counseling and psychotherapy. Adler himself campaigned for the social equality of women, contributed much to the understanding of gender issues, spoke against the marginalization of minority groups, and specifically predicted both the Women's Liberation and Black Power movements (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1978; Dreikurs, 1971; Hoffman, 1994; LaFountain & Mustaine, 1998; Mozdierz, 1998). LaFountain and Mustaine noted that Individual Psychology played an influential role in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of May 17, 1954:

Kenneth B. Clark headed a team of social scientists who called on Adlerian theory to explain the need for equality in American society. Their argument against separate-but-equal schools swayed the highest court in its decision that ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. (p. 196)

Conclusion

Is Individual Psychology still relevant as we enter the new millennium? Given the contemporary status and direction of the psychotherapeutic field, along with the increasing emphasis on multicultural understanding and applications, the answer to this question is *strongly affirmative*. Contemporary therapeutic models are steadily progressing toward a position congruent with the Adlerian perspective, whether theorists and practitioners realize it or not.

Adler died in 1937 having created a personality theory and approach to therapy so far ahead of its time that contemporary “cutting-edge” theories and therapies are only now “discovering” many of Adler’s fundamental conclusions, typically without reference to or acknowledgment of Adler. (Watts, 1999, p. 8)

As Bitter (1998) noted, “the more the fields of psychology and psychotherapy develop, the more relevant the ideas and processes of Individual Psychology become” (p. 412).

The beauty of Individual Psychology is its flexibility: Adlerian practitioners can be both theoretically integrative (albeit consistent) and technically eclectic. Different clients may require different therapeutic metaphors. One client may prefer a narrative-oriented approach, another a solution-focused orientation, and yet another a cognitive-behavioral or systemic one. The Individual Psychology model allows the therapist to do whatever is in the best interest of his or her client, rather than forcing the client—and his or her unique situation—into one therapeutic framework.

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