

# Adlerian “Encouragement” and the Therapeutic Process of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

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*The authors discuss the overlooked similarities between the therapeutic process of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) and the Adlerian process of therapeutic encouragement. SFBT and Adlerian therapy share common perspectives, albeit using different nomenclature, on maladjustment, the client–counselor relationship, and methods of facilitating change. The authors also present conclusions regarding the continuing relevance of Adlerian therapy for contemporary counseling practice.*

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Corey (1996) stated that one of Adler’s most important contributions to the field of counseling and psychotherapy was his influence on other systems. Adler’s influence has been acknowledged by—or his vision traced to—the neo-Freudians (e.g., Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979; Ellenberger, 1970), existential therapy (e.g., Frankl, 1963, 1970; May, 1970, 1989), person-centered therapy (e.g., Ansbacher, 1990; Watts, 1998), rational-emotive therapy (e.g., Dryden & Ellis, 1987; Ellis, 1970, 1973, 1989), cognitive therapy (e.g., Beck, 1976; Beck & Weishaar, 1989; Dowd & Kelly, 1980; Freeman, 1981, 1993; Raimy, 1975), reality therapy (e.g., Glasser, 1984; Whitehouse, 1984; Wubbolding, 1993), and family systems approaches (e.g., Broderick & Schrader, 1991; Carich & Willingham, 1987; Kern, Hawes, & Christensen, 1989; Nichols & Schwartz, 1995; Sherman & Dinkmeyer, 1987).

Given the recent epistemological shift in counseling toward a constructivist perspective (e.g., Ginter et al., 1996), it is not surprising to find that many ideas originally presented in the precursory postmodern theory of Alfred Adler have “reappeared” in contemporary counseling approaches, although often couched in different nomenclature and without acknowledgment of Adler’s contribution (Watts & Critelli, 1997). This seems to be particularly true regarding contemporary *constructivist* approaches (Dowd, 1997; Jones, 1995; Jones & Lyddon, 1997; Master, 1991; Scott, Kelly, & Tolbert, 1995; Shulman & Watts, 1997; Watkins, 1997; Watts, 1999; Watts & Critelli, 1997). In his writings, Adler carefully acknowledged the precursors that informed his theory and therapy development. However, in reviewing numerous works by theorists and practitioners of *solution-focused brief therapy*, one of the more popular of the constructivist

approaches to counseling, we found no substantive comment regarding Adler’s pioneering theory (Araoz & Carrese, 1996; Cade & O’Hanlon, 1993; de Shazer, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994; DeJong & Berg, 1998; Hoyt, 1994, 1996; Littrell, 1998; Matthews & Edgette, 1997; Metcalf, 1995; Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 1996; Murphy, 1997; O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Sklare, 1997; Walter & Peller, 1992; Weiner-Davis, 1992, 1995). This lack of acknowledgment of Adler was surprising given the wealth of common ground between Adlerian therapy and solution-focused brief therapy. Whereas there are numerous points of commonality, this article focuses solely on one of the more substantial parallels: the remarkable similarity between the Adlerian concept of *encouragement* and the therapeutic process of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT).

## ADLERIAN ENCOURAGEMENT AND SOLUTION-FOCUSED THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

Adler and subsequent Adlerians consider encouragement a crucial aspect of human growth and development. This is especially true in the field of counseling. Stressing the importance of encouragement in therapy, Adler (1956) stated: “Altogether, in every step of the treatment, we must not deviate from the path of encouragement” (p. 342). Dreikurs (1967) agreed: “What is most important in every treatment is encouragement” (p. 35). In addition, Dreikurs (1967) stated that therapeutic success was largely dependent on “[the therapist’s] ability to provide encouragement” and failure generally occurred “due to the inability of the therapist to encourage” (pp. 12–13). Encouragement skills include demonstrating concern for clients through active listening

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and empathy; communicating respect for, and confidence in, clients; focusing on clients' strengths, assets, and resources; helping clients generate perceptual alternatives for discouraging fictional beliefs; focusing on efforts and progress; and helping clients see the humor in life experiences (Adler, 1956; Carlson & Slavik, 1997; Dinkmeyer, 1972; Dinkmeyer & Losoncy, 1980; Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987; Dreikurs, 1967; Mosak, 1979; Mosak & Maniaci, 1998; Neuer, 1936; Sweeney, 1998).

SFBT authors have stated that the field of counseling has historically focused solely on pathology, on deficits and limitations of clients, and has ignored their strengths, abilities, and resources. A unique contribution of SFBT, according to these authors, is an optimistic therapeutic process that affirms clients' strengths (DeJong & Berg, 1998; Littrell, 1998; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). However, the therapeutic process of SFBT remarkably parallels the Adlerian process of encouragement in at least three areas: perspective on maladjustment, counselor-client relationship, and facilitating change. These three areas provide the structure for discussing the similarities between Adlerian encouragement and the SFBT therapeutic process.

### *Perspective on Maladjustment*

SFBT eschews the "medical model" perspective and takes a nonpathological approach. Clients are not sick and thus are not identified or "labeled" by their diagnoses (DeJong & Berg, 1998; de Shazer, 1991; Littrell, 1998; Metcalf, 1995; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Walter & Peller, 1992). Littrell stated that clients present for counseling because they are "demoralized" or "discouraged," not because they are sick and in need of a cure. Clients "lack hope. . . . One of our tasks as counselors is to assist in the process of restoring patterns of hope" (p. 63).

The Adlerian position is strikingly similar to the one typically espoused by SFBT. Mosak (1979) affirmed that Adlerians have "abandoned the medical model" (p. 64). Therefore, "Adlerians do not see people as psychologically sick, but discouraged. The process of psychotherapy is not seen by Adlerians as 'curing' anything, but as a process of encouragement" (Manaster & Corsini, 1982, p. 160). Dreikurs (1967) noted the essential necessity of encouragement in counseling. He stated that presenting problems are "based on discouragement" and without "encouragement, without having faith in himself restored, [the client] cannot see the possibility of doing or functioning better" (p. 62). Adler (1956) once asked a client what he thought made the difference in his successful experience in therapy. The client replied, "That's quite simple. I had lost all courage to live. In our consultations I found it again" (p. 342).

### *Counselor-Client Relationship*

The client-counselor relationship in SFBT is variously described using words such as "cooperative," "collaborative," "egalitarian," "mutual," "optimistic," "respectful," and "shared" (DeJong & Berg, 1998; de Shazer, 1985, 1991; Littrell, 1998;

O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Walter & Peller, 1992). In developing the relationship, the counselor focuses on developing a strong therapeutic alliance, trusting the client, and exploring the clients' competencies. DeJong and Berg (1998) noted that most of the basic skills used in building this relationship are not unique to SFBT. In addition, Littrell (1998) said, "strategies and techniques are ineffectual if the facilitative conditions of warmth, genuineness, and empathy do not permeate the counseling process" (p. 8).

The Adlerian position strongly parallels that of SFBT. All the words used in the SFBT literature to describe the counselor-client relationship are also used in the Adlerian literature (e.g., Adler, 1956; Dreikurs, 1967; Dinkmeyer et al., 1987; Mosak, 1979; Sweeney, 1998). For Adlerians, a strong counselor-client relationship is usually developed when counselors model social interest. Watts (1998) noted that Adler's descriptions of therapist-modeled social interest look very similar to Rogers's descriptions of the core facilitative conditions of client change: congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding. Furthermore, Mosak (1979) discussed the counselor-client relationship in terms of "faith, hope, and love" (p. 63), that is, expressing faith in clients and helping them develop faith in themselves, instilling hope in clients, and helping clients experience a relationship with an individual who truly cares. The basic skills necessary to build the therapeutic alliance discussed in the Adlerian literature (e.g., Dinkmeyer et al., 1987; Mosak, 1979) are mainly the same ones mentioned in the SFBT literature (e.g., DeJong & Berg, 1998; Littrell, 1998).

### *Facilitating Change*

SFBT counselors seek to help clients change clients' behaviors and attitudes from a problem/failure focus to a focus on solutions/successes and to discover and develop latent assets, resources, and strengths that may have been overlooked as clients have focused primarily on "problems" and "limitations" (Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; DeJong & Berg, 1998; de Shazer, 1985, 1991; Littrell, 1998; Metcalf, 1995; Murphy, 1997; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Sklare, 1997; Walter & Peller, 1992). According to O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, counselors using this approach are trying to do three things:

1. *Change the "doing" of the situation that is perceived as problematic* (p. 126). By helping clients change their present actions and interactions, they become free to "use other, atypical actions that are more likely to resolve their situations than repeating unsuccessful patterns" (p. 126).
2. *Change the "viewing" of the situation that is perceived as problematic* (p. 126). Facilitating changes in clients' frames of reference—both in and out of counseling—may produce changes in behavior and elicit untapped strengths and abilities.
3. *Evoke resources, solutions, and strengths to bring to the situation that is perceived as problematic* (pp. 126-127).

Reminding clients of their abilities, resources, and strengths may create changes in behaviors or perceptions.

Littrell added:

As counselors we help clients find and/or create patterns of thoughts, feelings, actions, and meaning. We code these patterns with names like "resources" or "abilities" or "inner strengths." Some patterns we rediscover from clients' pasts; some are currently being used but clients have not yet recognized them as such. We can also co-create new patterns that do not yet exist in clients' repertoire or we can modify current ones. (pp. 63-64)

Here again the commonality between SFBT and Adlerian therapy is substantial. As "technical eclectics" (Manaster & Corsini, 1982), Adlerians actively use a myriad of techniques to help clients create new patterns of behavior, develop more encouraging perceptions, and access resources and strengths (Adler, 1929; Dinkmeyer, 1972; Dinkmeyer et al., 1987; Dreikurs, 1967; Mosak, 1979; Sweeney, 1998). Aspects of Adlerian encouragement specifically salient to this section include helping clients identify and combat discouraging cognitions; generate perceptual alternatives; focus on efforts, not merely outcomes; and emphasize assets, resources, and strengths (Adler, 1956; Dinkmeyer, 1972; Dinkmeyer et al., 1987; Dreikurs, 1967; Mosak, 1979).

Encouragement focuses on helping counselees become aware of their worth. By encouraging them, you help your counselees recognize their own strengths and assets, so they become aware of the power they have to make decisions and choices. . . . Encouragement focuses on beliefs and self-perceptions. It searches intensely for assets and processes feedback so the client will become aware of her strengths. In a mistake-centered culture like ours, this approach violates norms by ignoring deficits and stressing assets. The counselor is concerned with changing the client's negative self-concept and anticipations. (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987, p. 124)

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

What implications or conclusions may be drawn from the striking similarities between the therapeutic process of a so-called classical theory like Adlerian therapy and that of a postmodern one like SFBT? Whereas many considerations may be generated, we would like to offer three.

#### *Multicultural Considerations*

With the increasing emphasis on multiculturalism, many counselors have been drawn to postmodern approaches because of their focus on the social embeddedness of humans and, consequently, human knowledge. Adlerians and Adlerian theory have addressed social equality issues and emphasized the social embeddedness of humans and human knowledge long before multiculturalism became a focal issue in the profession. Adler campaigned for the social equality of women, contributed much to the understanding of gender issues, spoke against the marginalization of minor-

ity groups, and specifically predicted the Black Power and Women's Liberation movements (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1978; Dreikurs, 1971; Hoffman, 1994; LaFountain & Mustaine, 1998; Mozdierz, 1998). LaFountain and Mustaine noted that Adlerian theory 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)

One may ask, Is the Adlerian approach relevant for working with culturally diverse populations in contemporary society? Gerald Corey's invited commentary, included in a 1991 special issue of the *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* titled "Macrostrategies in Mental Health Counseling," offers an affirmative reply:

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 competent, 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. (as cited in Sweeney, 1998, pp. 33-34)

Furthermore, Arciniega and Newlon (1999), in a chapter titled "Counseling and Psychotherapy: Multicultural Considerations," stated that the contemporary counseling theory holding the greatest promise for addressing multicultural issues is Adlerian theory. They noted that the characteristics and assumptions of Adlerian psychology are congruent with the cultural values of many 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)

#### *Managed Care Considerations*

Prochaska and Norcross (1994) presented the results of a Delphi study that asked "experts" to suggest the current and the near-future state of the field of psychotherapy. The results suggested that psychoeducational, present-oriented, and brief or time-limited approaches would continue to be the norm, and, regarding theoretical orientations, "integrative, eclectic, systems, and cognitive theoretical persuasions will thrive" (p. 486). This description of the field of psychotherapy seems to be supported by outcome research and to parallel the continuing demands of managed care

(Friedman, 1997; Hoyt, 1995; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999; Johnson, 1997; Miller et al., 1996; Sauber, 1997; Sexton, Whiston, Bleuer, & Walz, 1997).

Persons thoroughly familiar with Adlerian theory will note the similarity between the aforementioned description of the current/near-future state of psychotherapy and the Adlerian approach to counseling, especially regarding the process of therapeutic encouragement. Adlerian therapy is a psychoeducational, present/future-oriented, and brief or time-limited approach. Adlerian therapy, albeit theoretically consistent, is both integrative and eclectic and clearly integrates cognitive and systemic perspectives. In addition, the Adlerian approach, as noted earlier, solidly resonates with postmodern ones. Both the Adlerian and non-Adlerian literature clearly substantiate these points (e.g., Ansbacher, 1972; Carlson & Dinkmeyer, 1999; Dinkmeyer et al., 1987; Dowd & Kelly, 1980; Freeman & Urschel, 1997; Jones & Lyddon, 1997; Kern, Yeakle, & Sperry, 1989; LaFountain & Mustaine, 1998; Maniacci, 1996; Nicoll, 1999; Schneider & Stone, 1998; Sherman, 1999; Shulman, 1985; Sperry, 1989, 1997; Watts, 1999, 2000). Whereas Adlerian therapy is clearly congruent with the contemporary field of counseling and is appropriate for use with culturally diverse populations, we believe that the Adlerian approach is appropriate for use in managed care environments.

### *Integrative Considerations*

Contemporary counselors are expected to be integrative and eclectic. Adlerian therapy is a very flexible approach that is highly integrative and technically eclectic. Adlerian therapy allows counselors to do whatever is in the best interest of clients, rather than forcing clients—and their unique situations—into one therapeutic framework.

There is great value in a broad theoretical model like Adlerian therapy. As Bitter (1997) noted, a broad model "allows for growth and development from within as well as integration of useful interventions from other models" (p. 372). Regardless of one's theoretical orientation, however, the encouragement process is one of many aspects of Adlerian therapy that may be usefully integrated in a counselor's approach to counseling. The assumptions, characteristics, and methods of encouragement help to create an optimistic, empowering, and growth-enhancing environment for clients; a place where they feel "en-abled" rather than "dis-abled."

### **CONCLUSION**

This article discusses overlooked similarities between the therapeutic process of SFBT and the Adlerian process of therapeutic encouragement. Both approaches emphasize empathic listening; nonjudgmental acceptance; conveying respect for clients and developing collaborative and egalitarian relationships; having faith in clients and conveying that faith and confidence to them; viewing clients as "decision-makers"; focusing on strengths, assets, and resources clients may develop or already possess; identifying discour-

aging beliefs and facilitating perceptual alternatives; and focusing on efforts and incremental accomplishments rather than a "finished product."

The SFBT literature suggests that the therapeutic process in SFBT is significantly different from any of the other more "traditional" therapies. Whereas this may be true for some and perhaps many approaches, the evidence presented in this article demonstrates that it is not true for Adlerian therapy. The similarity between the approaches is one of several reasons stated in this article affirming that Adlerian therapy is appropriate for working with culturally diverse populations, appropriate for use in managed care settings, and useful for technical and theoretical integration.

Given the striking similarities between the approaches, and having found no substantive mention of Adlerian ideas in the literature of SFBT, the question naturally arises: Why has Adlerian therapy not been more widely acknowledged in the SFBT literature? Two possible suggestions are offered here.

The first is an extension of the "wide-spread plagiarism" charge made by psychological historian Henri Ellenberger (1970). In addressing the influence of Adler for an earlier generation's psychological theory and practice, Ellenberger stated: "It would not be easy to find another author from which so much has been borrowed from all sides without acknowledgment than Alfred Adler" (p. 645).

The second suggestion, which we favor, might be called the "zeitgeist effect" (Watts & Critelli, 1997). Adler's constructivistic approach was too far ahead of its time. Thus, the ideas of Adler and subsequent Adlerians were, for the most part, ignored or overlooked because they were considered unscientific or unworthy of note. As a result, many "secondary source" texts have provided inadequate and inaccurate presentations of Adlerian theory and therapy. For example, Adlerian theory/therapy is often erroneously described as "neo-Freudian" and thus discussed with other psychoanalytic therapies (Silverman & Corsini, 1986). Consequently, many contemporary constructivist authors—including those espousing SFBT—may have inadvertently overlooked Adlerian theory/therapy. Adler's ideas were marginalized because they were out of step with the dominant metaphors of his time, and, consequently, his theory was discounted, even though many of his ideas have been assimilated into subsequent theoretical positions (Watts & Critelli, 1997).

We are certainly not suggesting that Adler is the only viable forerunner of contemporary constructive approaches to counseling or denying that constructive authors have made unique contributions to the field. In fact, there is much of value for integration and clinical use in all of the constructive approaches, regardless of one's theoretical orientation. However, with the emergence of a constructivist perspective in the helping professionals that looks so similar to the Adlerian position, it may be time for a new look at the past to become better acquainted (or reacquainted) with a pioneering constructivist approach to counseling and psychotherapy.

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