Integrating Social Interest when Working with At-Risk Youth

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Abstract

Key concepts of Adlerian theory are discussed in this paper, including the life style, life tasks, encouragement, how one becomes discouraged and social interest. The term at-risk youth is defined in order to explore the application of Adlerian principles to this population. The methods and benefits of integrating social interest into the lives of youth are also discussed. The role of the youths’ parents encouraging and instilling the value of social interest into their children is also included in this work.
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Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler was born in 1870 in Vienna, Austria. When Adler began his work as an ophthalmologist, he gained interest in the neuroses of the patients he was treating. While his interest grew, he began to focus on prevention of medical issues and he sustained this interest throughout the remainder of his life (Ansbacher, 1992). Adler’s Society for Free Analytic Research was a group he started that met weekly to discuss psychology. Watts and Carlson (1999) report Adler did not limit the meetings to professionals only, much to the chagrin of some (p. 182).

Bitter (2007) stated that Adler believed, “human beings were not merely a collection of traits or parts but rather were active agents, engaged with others, creating and interpreting life within specific communities and cultures (p. 5).” Individuals are integrated into communities and need other people to build on a sense of belonging. Ansbacher (1992) reports Adler felt his theory was based on ideas that every-day people could understand (p. 10) and he did this in order for everyone to have the opportunity to use the theory.

According to Toal, when asked to explain his theory, Adler would become uncomfortable and explain it as an art form. He did not want it to be translated into guidelines and rules (1966, p.44). Those studying Adler’s theory benefited from interpreting it in his or her own way.

Individual Psychology

“Alfred Adler developed his view under the name Individual Psychology (Overholser, 2010, p. 348).” Individuals have their own interpretations when describing it and how it was developed by Adler. Ansbacher (2011) writes, “Individual Psychology calls for a holistic approach, according to which the individual is understood in all his or her expressions and
behaviors by searching for his or her basic thread” (p. 9). Focusing on one aspect of an individual leaves out a significant amount of information needed in order to gain insight into that person.

According to Pew (1976), Alfred Adler’s main interest when working with clients was to gain an understanding as well as a description of the characteristics of the individual in order to gain insight into the client (p. 1). Understanding the client as a whole is vital to learning the lifestyle, mistaken beliefs and the individual’s teleology; which is the purpose one has in life.

Defining At-Risk Youth

Moore states, “Children have been defined as ‘at risk’ with a variety of different indicators, including having limited reading proficiency, having experienced abuse or trauma, having a disability or illness, or having exhibited behavior problems (2006).” The National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center further explains at risk youth as having issues with chemicals, pregnancy, involvement in delinquent activities, gang activity and issues with academics (n.d.).”

According to Cassels, one in 12 teens engages in self-harm, but the majority of this behavior ceases upon entering adulthood (2011). Self-harm includes cutting, burning and scratching on the body. Brock and Barnard (2009) report approximately 5% of American children have a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (p. 106). It has been found that those who engage in self-harm and/or have symptoms of ADHD could be seen as at-risk.

A child who is engaged in at-risk behavior could be seen as lacking in a sense of belonging. Dreikurs-Ferguson (2010) writes that when one feels a sense of belonging, he is more likely to contribute to society (p. 1). When encouragement is used, at-risk behavior is likely to dissipate. When a child’s behavior has been deemed inappropriate, Kohn (1993) reports
the next task is to find out the source of the problem if this behavior is ongoing (p. 237). If the at-risk behavior can be resolved through encouragement on the part of caring individuals, this could be enough to give the youth the courage to stop.

At-risk youth are lacking in the area of prosocial behavior, which is defined by Crain (2011) as, “acts of sharing, helping, cooperation and altruism (p. 210).” When prosocial behavior is displayed, encouragement can be used to help the child to repeat the behavior. Youth engaging in risky behavior are lacking in cooperation and are working against the common goal. Davidson (1991) reports that as long as an individual is alive, he is moving in the direction of being cooperative or moving in the direction of being uncooperative; and he is likely focused on his own problems rather than in the problems of society (p. 43).

Karrel and Gill (2002) write that Adler described the neurotic as an individual who is self-absorbed and concerned only about his relationships (p. 161). Adler might have described at-risk youth as being neurotic as they have a tendency to focus solely on meeting their own needs and devalue the needs of others.

**Case Study**

‘Tom’, 15 year old male, revealed in therapy that his mother sexually abused him, which resulted in the therapist reporting this to human services. After an initial investigation and a variety of interventions attempted, it was determined that residential treatment would be the most beneficial for Tom as well as the family and community.

The initial investigation revealed Tom’s life had been one struggle after another. His parents divorced when he was six years old due to the relationship being destructive in nature. His parents fought incessantly and moved frequently because his mother was unable to sustain employment and she caused problems in the community. Tom’s father revealed he had
suspicions of his mother abusing the children, but was never able to substantiate it. Tom’s father won custody of the children after a lengthy divorce.

Tom began to display behavioral issues at 9 years of age. He was acting out in school, touching peers inappropriately and had few healthy interactions with others. The school recommended that Tom participate in therapy to determine the root cause of the issues and gain insight into how to help him. Tom revealed in therapy his mother sexually abused him as a young child, likely between the ages of 3 to 7, which is when he moved in with his father on a permanent basis. Due to his revelation, Human Services was notified by the school and Tom was assigned a social worker.

Tom completed a battery of mental health assessments to establish a foundational diagnosis. He was initially diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder. He was then referred to a psychiatrist to determine if medication would be beneficial, after which, Tom began a medication regimen to relieve attention and anxiety symptoms. According to Carlson, Watts and Maniacci (2006), individuals develop symptoms, on an unconscious level to avoid feelings of inferiority (p. 60). Tom’s anxiety was created in order to help him avoid dealing with emotions stemming from the abuse.

With the help of therapy, medication and changes within the family, Tom was able to regain some control over his life. Tom’s father also participated in therapy to help cope with the guilt he felt from not knowing about the abuse and to receive education on handling the long-term effects the abuse will have on Tom.

As Tom entered his teenage years, he started refusing to attend therapy or discuss what happened in the past. He was arrested for coming to school intoxicated and possession of marijuana. Tom was placed on probation and ordered to complete an evaluation for possible
chemical dependency. Tom’s marijuana use did not warrant treatment, but he was placed on probation. The probation department monitored him through urinalysis and he maintained sobriety for a period of six months, after which he was successfully discharged from probation. Tom’s was experiencing more anxiety and having issues with staying on task in school; therefore, his medication was increased.

In the 9th grade, Tom’s father found him intoxicated and his recourse was to contact law enforcement. Tom was cited for underage consumption and ordered to take a class on the effects of abusing alcohol. Tom’s behavior had an increasingly negative affect on the family and his father suspected he was abusing his brothers. It was not determined that Tom was abusing his brothers at that point as the boys denied sexual involvement with Tom. Dad reported that Tom’s behavior was escalating and he worried that Tom would hurt himself or someone else. He also noticed that Tom had burn marks on his arm and Tom reported that he and his peers were doing this because they were bored.

The social worker involved in Tom’s case met with Tom’s father to discuss options. Due to the safety risk that Tom was posing to himself and others, her recommendation was that Tom be placed in a residential setting where he could gain skills relating to peer relationships, sobriety, overcoming abuse and learning prosocial behavior. Tom’s father agreed and he was transitioned into the long-term program at Elmore Academy.

When Tom arrived at Elmore Academy, he was taking 13 different medications, had diagnoses of ADHD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Conduct Disorder (CD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Depression. Upon arrival, Tom went into his bedroom, which was on the third floor, to unpack. Tom attempted to jump out the window upon entering the room, however, staff members intervened and were able
to grab his legs and pull him to safety. Tom was then placed on a 72-hour psychiatric hold to determine if he was suicidal. It was determined this was not an attempt to take his life, but to run away. Tom returned to the facility and was placed on a suicide watch despite the determination.

Tom was assigned to a therapist as a part of his treatment. Tom initially refused to attend sessions and when he did attend, he refused to speak. Karasu and Bellak (1980) report one way to engage a youth in therapy is to discuss something that is of interest to him (p. 268). This shows the youth that the therapist is human and has interests other than telling him what to do. Tom began to build trust because the therapist began by speaking about football and farming, as these were things in which they both had a personal interest.

**Style of Life**

When using Adler’s theory of Individual Psychology, the therapist is working to help the client understand his style of life (Nash & Nash, 2010), which is a vital part of Individual Psychology (IP). Powers and Griffith (1987) write that in order to understand a client’s lifestyle, the therapist must understand his movements and patterns (p. 7). When the purpose of an individual’s movements and goals are identified, he is empowered to make necessary changes.

Mosak and DiPietro (2006) report the life style is the individual’s set of attitudes and is a compilation of life’s convictions (p. 3). Adler believed that understanding the life style of an individual is necessary to gain insight into goals and to understand what the individual is striving for. According to Mosak and DiPietro, the convictions of one’s lifestyle fall under the categories of self-concept, self-ideal, ethical convictions and a view of the world (2006).

Highland, Kern and Curlette (2010) described Adler’s four life style types as: the socially interested type, the getting type, the ruling type and the avoiding type (p. 438). Adler devised many methods for identifying one’s life style including Early Recollections (ERs), Birth Order,
and using the Miracle Question. Each of these methods can help the client empower himself to strive with others to achieve the common goal.

The information gathered from an ER can be interpreted as the view one holds of himself, others and the world (Mosak & DiPietro, 2006). “Early recollections can be used as a projective assessment because people project their beliefs onto these memories (2006, p. 3).” When values and beliefs are established, guidance and collaboration can occur to help achieve a sense of belonging.

According to Mosak and DiPietro (2006), “Early recollections are stories of events that a person says occurred before he or she was 10 years of age (p. 1).” If the story is too recent, it will be factual and not an interpretation and it will also not reveal the values and beliefs of the client. The entire story the individual reveals should be considered including if men or women are present or not, if the individual is alone and what movement takes place. To gain an understanding of the core issue, the therapist asks for the most vivid part of the story (Mosak & DiPietro, 2006).

Adler also developed the Miracle Question method. When describing the Miracle Question, Santa Rita (1998) cites deShazer stating, “Suppose that one night, while you were asleep, there was a miracle and this problem was solved. How would you know? What would be different (p. 189).” When the individual compares current situations to what life may be like if the dream came true, he can begin to construct changes. Once he sees the previous goals were getting in the way of success, he can only choose a new way of thinking about them. From an Adlerian therapist perspective, this is called this ‘spitting in the client’s soup’.

Adler strongly believed that birth order was another important facet, which can aide in determining the client’s psychological characteristics. Adler used birth order information to
develop insight, gain trust and interpret the behavior and dreams of a client (Carlson and Slavik, 1997). In order to use this as a method, having accurate knowledge of the effects of birth order is necessary and should only be used as a probability (Carlson & Slavik, 1997).

Children born into the same family will have similar characteristics to each other due to the values instilled by their parents. Davidson (1992) argues the psychological situation is different for each child because of birth order (p. 167). The way a child interprets the situation into which he was born plays a role in determining his view of the world, which then determines the emotional position into which the child places himself.

Shulman and Mosak (1998) discuss Adler’s five positions regarding birth order. The positions include: first-born, second, middle, youngest and only (p. 30). Each of the positions have characteristics and traits that can be identified as similar when doing a comparison. These probable characteristics are dynamic, as families change due to the birth of new siblings or combining families.

**Tom’s life style.** Tom’s life style was distorted due to the trauma and disruptions he faced as a young child, which then skewed the way he valued life and viewed the world. The distortion grew in part, because boundaries were not instilled; therefore, he had few limits on his behavior. He was accused of poor boundaries with his peers at school and his father suspected him of abusing his younger brothers.

Tom’s father was unable to identify the purpose of Tom’s movement until acknowledging the abuse. In studying the history of his behavior, Tom was likely trying to gain power by overcompensating due to control being taken away when his mother was abusing him and his subsequent feeling he lacked a voice, he took control and overcompensated by displaying
poor behavior. Tom vacillated between the life style types, depending on the social setting in which he found himself.

Tom reported he did not have an established peer group. In addition, Tom’s peer group could not provide him sober support. Regarding the ruling type, Tom often would boss his brothers around and attempt to gain power over them. With regards to the getting type, Tom often did things without having the care and concern of others in mind. He broke rules at home and school and did what he wanted to in the community.

Tom’s birth order played an important role in his life style. Tom was the only child for three years and then his mother gave birth to two boys in quick succession. Tom’s profile fit some of the typical traits of oldest children, including the need to feel superior and having a domineering demeanor.

**Life Tasks**

Adler’s notion of life tasks include work, intimacy and friendship. Adler argued that in order to have a full sense of belonging, to contribute to social interest and achieve common goals, one must participate in the life tasks. The work task is defined as individuals contributing to the community in which they reside (Mosak & DiPietro, 2006). The friendship task is explained as having relationships with others who are a part of the community. The task of intimacy is important; everyone needs people who are close. These relationships, both biological and social, have roles in a person’s life (Mosak & DiPietro, 2006). Participating in the life tasks helps others to work together in order to achieve the common goal.

Goals set by a community can be achieved effectively when individuals are participating fully in the life tasks. According to Davidson (1991), as discouragement grows, the goals can
appear to be unachievable (p. 115). However, if the individual has a support group that encourages and guides that person, he will likely prevail and move toward cooperation.

**Tom’s life tasks.** Tom’s father would pay him to do chores. He worked diligently, stayed focused and took pride in his efforts. His father would praise him, but that praise was often followed up with comments about what could have been done better, which was discouraging.

Tom’s intimate relationships were disruptive and unhealthy. His father tried to use consequences when Tom broke the rules, but he rarely followed through and the consequences were often not logical or natural. Tom’s relationship with his mother was disrupted from the abuse and divorce. Eventually he was unable to see her without supervision. Tom’s brothers would often avoid him because they were younger than him and preferred to do things that Tom did not find interesting.

Tom did not have close friendships with others and did not participate in social interest activities that would have integrated him into social relationships. His father encouraged him to try out for sports, but he often was not selected for the team because he was new to the school and lacked the skills the coaches wanted. He stopped enrolling in activities by 7th grade.

**Encouragement**

Cheston (2000) cites Dinkmeyer regarding encouragement as being, “the process of facilitating the development of a person’s inner resources and courage toward positive movement (p. 298).” When explaining the difference between praise and encouragement; praise relates to the accomplishment and encouragement relates to the effort put into the accomplishment. Carns and Carns (1998) cite Kelly and Chick on the eleven elements contained in the use of encouragement including: valuing children as they are, demonstrating genuineness, using humor
and spending regular time with children (p. 72). When these elements are present, encouragement will be successful which will benefit everyone.

In a therapeutic setting, the use of encouragement instills a sense of belonging in the client, which will encourage him to work together with others toward the common goal. Carlson and Slavik (1997) cited Ansbacher and Ansbacher as stating, “Altogether, in every step of the treatment, we must not deviate from the path of encouragement” (p. 27). Cheston (2000) cites Dreikurs as stating in order for one to use encouragement to its fullest, one must have the courage to be imperfect (p. 298).

**How Discouragement Perpetuates Inferiority Feelings and Helplessness**

Cheston writes that a way to identify discouragement is to watch how a person holds himself. If he isolates himself or walks as if he is carrying a lot of weight on his shoulders, these could be signs of discouragement (Cheston, 2000). Understanding the goals of misbehavior will help gain insight into the client and how discouragement is guiding him. The four goals of misbehavior are attention, power, revenge and inadequacy. Upon identifying the goal of misbehavior, one can then understand the mistaken beliefs and goals of the client.

Mistaken beliefs, or fictions, are built to help cope with situations the client is not ready to face. Stone (2011) writes that Adler believed the meaning of life lies in one’s fictions, especially if they are governing the way one lives (p. 13). Mistaken beliefs interfere in the way an individual lives life, which prevents them from fully achieving goals he has set. Shulman and Mosak classify mistaken beliefs in five categories. These include overgeneralizations, false or unattainable goals of security, misperceptions of life and its demands, minimizing one’s worth and faulty values (1990, p. 20).
Adler (1998) identifies three types of children who are subject to overcompensating (pp 418-419). The three types include children include those who are weak or ill, children raised by authoritative parents and those who are pampered. Weak or ill children are identified as having a sickness or weakness that prevents them from fully living life. Authoritative parents control the life of the child and do not permit him to make decisions. A pampered child is one who has parents that do not allow them to make mistakes and indulge the child. Davidson (1991) writes the pampered child is inadvertently raised to believe he cannot handle situations on his own because self-confidence is lacking (p. 363).

**Tom’s discouragement.** Tom was discouraged due to his parent’s failed relationship, his lack of encouragement and not recognizing he could be successful in having control over life. When his treatment team began to work with him, he rejected all attempts due to his issues of a lack of trust. As time passed, Tom began to realize his treatment team was there to help and encourage his success.

Upon gaining insight into the importance of cooperating and contributing, Tom was given more freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. While at Elmore Academy, Tom gained employment, participated in sports and built trust to have less supervision. He also was often selected for special projects due to his level of effort and pride in his work.

**Social Interest**

Carlson and Slavik (1997) state, “Adler believed that social interest was the measure of mental health insofar as it reflected the individual’s capacity to give and take, the willingness to participate and cooperate for the common benefit of the group” (p. 458). When an individual is fully participating in social interest activities, one would say they are mentally healthy and have a willingness to cooperate. Social interest is demonstrated by individuals participating in
activities that are goal oriented as well as participants working toward the common goal. In order for one to have interest in an activity, one must understand the purpose and the goal. According to Stone (2008), Adler believed the foundation of social interest is that of common sense (p. 24).

Davidson (1991) writes, “Anything people do or do not do, any relationship they establish or fail to establish is based upon the development of social interest” (p. 6). People build relationships to gain a sense of belonging. People will avoid building relationships due to feelings of inferiority and discouragement relating to relationships that have failed in the past. The sense of belonging is what drives individuals to gain employment or attend church on Sunday. When the sense of belonging is absent, individuals will avoid these activities. According to Peven (2004), Adler believed all persons are moving toward the common goal of developing social interest within himself (p. 392).

Social interest is inborn in everyone; however it needs to be developed by those who individuals interact with (Davidson, 1991). Parents are vital educators in the life of the child as he needs the parent to role model and teach the importance of social interest. When a child is two or three years old, they generally begin to learn to play with other children (Carlson & Slavik, 1997). This is an opportune time for parents to teach simple ways to integrate into social interest activities. If teaching is encouraging and healthy, the child will have a successful transition into school years and integrating himself into new peer groups.

**Tom’s social interest.** If the measure of an individual’s mental health is determined by social interest, Tom would be identified as severely mentally ill. Tom refused to integrate himself into peer groups and when he did, he often displayed poor boundaries and odd behavior, which resulted in his classmates avoiding him. The variety of diagnoses he was given and the
significant amount of medication he was taking, an Adlerian would presume he is not active in social interest.

In observing Tom’s family system, it was evident the entire system lacked social interest. Tom’s father worked and had relationships with others, but those were limited because of the poor behavior of Tom’s mother. Her behavior included being rude to friends and safety concerns regarding Tom’s siblings. Due to these circumstances, the family was unable to gain insight into the importance of social interest.

**The Role of Parents and Integrating Social Interest**

Ansbacher discussed ideas Adler held in raising mentally healthy children and helping those individuals transition into adulthood in a healthy manner. Those ideas included winning the child’s love, giving and building on the child’s confidence, gaining trust, giving praise and reward versus punishment and allowing the child to make his own decisions (1992, p. 7).

Four different types of parenting styles are identified in raising children which include: permissive, uninvolved, authoritarian and democratic. According to Dreikurs (1964), the authoritarian parent is looking for power over the child, pressures and demands and punishes in order to get the child to obey (p. 153). Democratic parenting allows for everyone in the family to have an equal say. When parents have identified important expectations, Kohn (1993) states the process in which they are set should include the children (p. 236). When a child is brought into the process of setting the expectations, he gains insight into why they are important and how the family can work together to achieve the same goal.

According to Crain (2011), a new parent wants to rear children in a manner that is more personal and tolerant; however, the way he was raised can get in the way of doing this (p. 303). Parents struggle with the idea that children have a say in making decisions due to the belief that
children do not have the skills and knowledge to make good decisions. If parents guide the child and give him choices, the child will learn through role modeling and encouragement. According to Feigal (2007), one way parents can change the behavior of a child is to spend energy when he is doing positive things and not to give any energy when he is displaying poor behavior (p. 16). In discussing consequences, Kohn (1993) reports that when using Dreikurs’ definition, a consequence should relate to the misbehavior, should be reasonable and handled in a respectful manner (p. 169).

Tom Today

Davidson (1991) states “People need to increase their creativeness for interdependence and the willingness to be interdependent” (p. 38). Once an individual accepts being interdependent, he begins the process of resolving inferiority feelings. When Tom began to see the importance of being interdependent, he was able to successfully complete the program at Elmore Academy. He returned home to live with his father, brothers and eventually a stepmother. Tom gained employment on his neighbor’s farm and sustained this for quite some time. He was encouraged by his father to try out for the high school football team and although he did not play much during his first season, he stayed on the team and enrolled the following year. Tom also began attending church services. This was something the family as a whole never did in the past, but found importance in this and began to attend regularly.

Tom’s relationship with his mother, the past abuse and building healthy relationships are struggles he continues to work through today. He attends therapy and reported a few months ago he is enrolling in post-secondary courses for mechanics and is looking forward to this transition in life.
Conclusion

Social interest is vital for every individual. When youth become discouraged and work against cooperating with the family and community, this puts them at risk. When there is a lack of social interest in life, the youth’s discouragement can become profound, which will perpetuate feelings of inferiority. Educating and providing resources to parents is vital for not only them, but the youth as well. When the parents believe in the importance of social interest, they will pass this onto the children who will crave the community involvement and want to cooperate in the common goal.
References


