Learning Task 4: Personal Position Paper

An Adlerian Framework of Counseling

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Developing a personal theory of counseling is a complex task, especially considering the multitude of psychotherapeutic theories that exist today and the diverse range of clients with whom psychologists and counselors work. Upon reflecting on my learning in this course as well as on my experience as an educator, I have come closer to being able to identify my own personal theory of counseling. Presently, Adlerian Psychotherapy (AP) is most closely aligned with my beliefs and represents what I envision the therapeutic process as encompassing. Also referred to as Individual Psychology, Alfred Adler’s AP appeals to me particularly because of its flexibility. According to Watts (2000), “Adlerian therapy allows therapists to do whatever is in the best interest of clients, rather than forcing clients, and their unique situations, into one therapeutic framework” (p. 25). In addition, AP is considered a psychoeducational approach, one that focuses on the present and future-oriented (Watts, 2000). As a future school psychologist whose practice will undoubtedly involve assessment, this aspect of AP is definitely appealing. Further, despite its historical roots, the practice of AP is still relevant today; in fact Adlerian theory is considered a “practical theoretical base from which today’s school counselors can work” (Ziomek-Daigle, McMahon, & Paisley, 2008, p. 450).

As I plan on working with children and adolescents in my role as a future school psychologist, I believe that AP is an appropriate form of psychotherapy to adopt into my personal theory of counseling. I also believe that AP easily lends itself to being practiced in a school setting which, as someone who plans on having a leadership role in school mental health, is important to me. This paper provides an overview of my personal theory of counseling as it relates to AP and my future role as a school psychologist. As such, it includes a description of both the philosophical assumptions underlying my theory and the counseling experience. This
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paper also presents a personal reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of my overall personal theoretical framework.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

**The Nature of Humans**

Adlerian psychotherapy is based upon several philosophical assumptions that seek to explain the nature of humans, one of which is holism (Bitter, 2007; Maniaci, Maniaci, & Mosak, 2014; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). The holistic assumption holds that each individual “is to be viewed in his or her entirety as a uniquely configured person who thinks, feels, and behaves as a unified whole” (Osborn, 2001, p. 245). As an educator, the holistic approach of AP is a defining feature of my personal framework of counseling. I believe that, just as taking the whole child into consideration when planning lessons and teaching ensures that the students with whom I work are better equipped to reach their full potential, taking the whole client into consideration as a therapist ensures that therapeutic intervention matches the client’s needs and facilitates change.

In addition to considering an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior, Adlerians also take into consideration his or her social context (Maniaci et al., 2014). In fact, proponents of AP note that an individual cannot be understood independently of his or her social context as human beings are socially embedded creatures (Watts, 2000). In this regard, family constellation is an important aspect of AP. The concept of family constellation holds that an individual’s perceptions of his or her place within the family unit influence his or her life decisions (Osborn, 2001). Thus, perception is important in understanding human nature. In fact, Osborn (2001) holds that Adler himself viewed perception “as the driving force of behavior” (p. 245). As a future school psychologist, I believe that both a child’s social context and his perceptions of his experiences should always be taken into consideration when providing therapy. According to
Maniaci et al., (2014), “By understanding children’s perceptions of their situations, a key insight is gained into the children’s worlds” (p. 57). It is this insight, I believe, that will ensure that children who suffer from academic, behavioral, and emotional difficulties are provided with the best possible support and interventions that meet their needs.

Teleology is another philosophical assumption on which the Adlerian perspective of human nature is based. According to the teleological assumption, all human behavior serves a purpose (Osborn, 2001; Maniaci et al., 2014). Bitter (2007) explains an individual’s purposeful behavior as representing movement, or directionality, toward goals; the difference between children and adults in this respect is that the goals children strive for are immediate and concrete whereas adults’ goals are long-term, or life-goals. Ballou (2002) holds that goals are “generally constructed around themes related to love, work, and friendship are what give people aspiration, conviction, hope, and inspiration” (p. 155). Understanding a client’s goals and the purpose behind them is an integral role of a school psychologist; I believe that this understanding will enable me to effectively support the children and adolescents with whom I work and help them reach their full potential.

The Nature of Well-Adjusted Functioning

A main focus of Adlerian psychotherapy is the promotion of wellness. As such, proponents of this theory concern themselves with the physical, mental, and social processes that contribute to an individual’s overall healthy functioning (Maniaci et al., 2014). Of particular concern is how an individual approaches life tasks. According to Maniaci et al. (2014), these tasks are based upon love, work, and socializing, and depending on how successful an individual is at meeting the demands of these tasks ultimately determines whether he or she fits into the “matrix of life” (p. 66). Belonging is thus central to Adlerians’ notion of well-adjusted
functioning; so too is connectedness. Kottman (2001) holds that all human beings have a natural propensity to connect with others, but that they must be taught how to do so in a positive way. I believe that it is incumbent upon a school psychologist and school mental health personnel to work toward instilling in students a sense of belonging. I also believe that these professionals are responsible for helping students develop the skills required to form positive connections with peers and other people in their lives.

According to Froeschle and Riney (2008), feelings of belonging and connectedness can be accomplished through the development of a concept known as social interest. Referred to as an individual’s engagement in life and concern for the well-being of others (Bitter, 2007), social interest is essential to human development (Froeschle & Riney, 2008). Along with meeting the demands of life tasks, the development of social interest ensures that individuals as well as humanity in general experience psychological wellness (Bitter, 2007). For this reason, proponents of AP consider the development of social interest a main therapeutic goal (Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). As a current educator and future school psychologist, I believe that fostering social interest in students is incredibly important. Froeschle & Riney (2008) hold that doing so can help students overcome personal obstacles that ultimately lead to behavioral and emotional difficulties. Mental health practitioners in school settings are in a perfect position to implement interventions that promote the development of this construct (Froeschle & Riney, 2008). With this in mind, I am confident that adopting the Adlerian perspective of helping others will be an asset insofar as empowering students to become contributing members of society and optimally functioning individuals is concerned.

Major Causes of Maladjusted Behavior
Adlerians adopt a nonpathological view of psychotherapy; ultimately, they believe that discouragement rather than sickness leads to psychopathology (Watts & Schulman, 2003). Discouragement is thought to occur when an individual experiences difficulty meeting the demands of life tasks or forms faulty perceptions with regard to his or her lifestyle (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). It can also occur when an individual fails to develop a sense of belonging (Shifron, 2010); this is especially true insofar as children are concerned. According to Ballou (2002), children who are denied recognition “may stall developmentally and become exclusively focused on their basic needs for attention and control” (p. 156). In fact, Rudolf Dreikurs (1972) proposed that when a child’s goal of belonging is not met and discouragement subsequently ensues, he or she may exhibit goals of misbehavior, including excessive need for attention, power, revenge, and an assumption of inadequacy. With regard to understanding and treating psychopathology in the school setting, I believe that adopting an Adlerian perspective will enhance my practice; in my opinion, this form of psychotherapy emphasizes the importance of understanding how and why a child exhibits problematic behavior instead of focusing solely on the presentation of psychopathological symptoms and a subsequent diagnosis.

**The Nature of Change**

One of the defining features of Adlerian psychotherapy is optimism. Adlerians adopt a growth model of change and believe that individuals have the potential to become better than they are regardless of the discouragement they experience in life and the pathology that they appear to present (Maniaci et al., 2014). Further, proponents of AP view the clients with whom they work as “capable, creative, and responsible beings” (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008, p. 456). Specifically, individuals are capable of reaching their goals – the ultimate of which is the
development of social interest - and the Adlerian counselor guides them in doing so (Watts & Schuman, 2003). The Adlerian philosophical assumption underlying the nature of change is thus aligned with my personal beliefs. Having worked as an educator for the past ten years, I believe that students have the propensity to change when they are provided with encouragement and the proper support, both at home and at school. I therefore believe that one of the primary roles of a school psychologist is to collaborate with the main stakeholders in a child’s education – including parents and teachers – to implement interventions that effectively facilitate change.

**The Counseling Experience**

**Definition of Counseling**

I believe that effective counselling is predicated upon a trusting relationship, one that is built and maintained by both the therapist and the client. This relationship is collaborative and involves the therapist guiding the client as he or she works toward achieving his or her goals. Developing rapport with the client is an integral part of the therapeutic process, and it is the therapist’s role to provide a safe environment in which the client feels comfortable disclosing information and taking risks. Furthermore, I believe that the therapist should work toward understanding the whole client; he or she must take into consideration a wide variety of factors that may affect the client’s behavior and cognitions in order to provide appropriate interventions that facilitate change. These factors include but are not limited to environmental, biological, and cultural factors. Although past experiences are sometimes important in understanding the client, I believe that effective therapy focuses on helping the client consider present experiences and set goals for the future. Finally, I believe that the overall counseling experience should promote a client’s self-awareness and enable him or her to approach life’s challenges with confidence.
Aspects of my personal definition of counseling can be found in Adlerian psychotherapy. For example, the relationship between therapist and client is based upon respect and collaboration, and the therapist helps the client set and work toward achieving her goals (Maniacci et al., 2014). In addition, AP is future-oriented, and proponents of this form of therapy are not overly concerned about past experiences and etiological causes (Osborn, 2001). Taking the holistic nature of an individual into consideration is also implicit in my theory of counseling, and so too is the socially embedded and goal-directed nature of humans that Adlerians emphasize (Maniacci et al., 2014).

**The Counseling Process**

The Adlerian counseling process is designed to help the therapist understand the client and work collaboratively with him or her to elicit change. This process involves the following four stages: relationship building, investigating, interpretation, and reorientation (Maniacci et al., 2014). During these stages, the therapist establishes rapport with the client, gathers information about his or her lifestyle, interprets the client’s early recollections, and works with the client in modifying his or her maladaptive lifestyle beliefs, respectively (Maniacci et al., 2014). Assessment is integrated into these phases (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). In particular, the lifestyle assessment is an integral component of AP. According to Maniacci et al. (2014), “It is here where the specifics of the case, the particular idiographic nature of the process, shines through” (p. 73). Understanding the idiographic nature of the client is a defining feature of the Adlerian counseling process.

**Therapeutic Relationship.** The therapeutic relationship is an integral component of AP. Proponents of this theory believe that establishing an alliance with clients requires a focus on respect, collaboration and that, above all, this alliance should be egalitarian in nature (Jones &
Lyddon, 2003). Further, Adlerians believe that the therapist and client must agree upon treatment goals; even though the therapist is an expert in the field of psychology, ultimately the client is an expert insofar as knowing himself in concerned (Maniacci et al., 2014). Thus, both the therapist and the client must work together to elicit change.

**Client-Counselor Roles.** Adlerian therapists play an active role throughout the therapeutic process. Maniacci et al. (2014) hold that they “interact, challenge, question, and debate but always in a respectful, egalitarian manner” (p. 82). In addition, Adlerian therapists focus on quality of contact, which is based upon a variety of therapist characteristics including warmth, compassion, encouragement, and interest (Bitter, 2007). Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2008) hold that, because proponents of AP consider clients as being capable and responsible, they adopt a collaborative rather than a directive approach. The client is thus invited to play an active role in therapy. At the beginning of and throughout the therapeutic process, the client provides the therapist with information about his or her symptoms, feelings, and experiences as well as pertinent information about his or her medical and social background (Bitter, 2007). Finally, Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan (2012) hold that, despite the therapist and the client acting as teacher and learner, respectively, ultimately both individuals are considered equals throughout the therapeutic process.

**Sessions.** Adlerian counseling sessions are not limited to working with individual clients. In fact, this form of therapy extends to treatment of couples, groups, and families (Maniacci et al., 2014). During the early sessions of therapy, the therapist interviews the client and obtains historical information that helps him or her obtain an understanding of his or her lifestyle (Maniacci et al., 2014). In the school setting, sessions often focus on psychoeducation in the form of classroom guidance; individual and small-group counseling sessions are also
implemented (Ziomek-Daigle, McMahon, & Paisley, 2008). Although AP does not have a designated length or frequency with regard to counseling sessions, I believe that, especially in a school setting, these factors are determined based on the needs of the individual students with whom a counselor or school psychologist works.

**Emphasis on the Past/Present/Future.** According to Watts (2000), AP is a present/future-oriented form of psychotherapy. As such, emphasis is placed on current healthy functioning and prosocial adaptation on the part of the client (Maniacci et al., 2014). Further, as creativity is an underlying philosophical assumption of AP and individuals are considered co-creators of their worlds, they play a goal-directed role in this adaptation (Maniacci et al., 2014). Adlerians, however, also take the past into consideration during the therapeutic process. Maniacci et al. (2014) hold that Adlerian counselors “will occasionally “glimpse” into the clients’ past as a means for understanding how they go to where they are now as well as how they parlay those past experiences into their current motivation and goals” (p. 61). In AP, the past, present, and future are interconnected (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012).

**Change Process**

In AP, encouragement is an important part of the change process. Encouragement involves acknowledging the strengths, efforts, and progress of the client during therapy as well as instilling in him the responsibility to build competence, courage, and the inclination to take risks (Kottman, 2001). In addition, Adlerians believe that focusing on the enhancement of an individual’s social interest ultimately empowers him or her to take action (Watts & Schuman, 2003). Modification is also at the heart of the change process. Rather than modify a client’s behavior, however, AP seeks to modify his or her style of life in order for him or her to effectively meet the demands of life tasks (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012).
Ideally, both encouragement and modification lead to the client’s altered perspective. According to Maniacci et al. (2014), “Through empathy, goal alignment, and mutual discovery and encouragement, the clients begin to see things differently” (p. 75); ultimately, this is the goal of the change process.

**Interventions**

**Specific Techniques.** A technically eclectic approach (Watts & Schuman, 2003), Adlerian counseling utilizes a variety of techniques throughout the therapeutic process. The diversity of Adlerian intervention strategies is due to the focus of this form of therapy on the ideographic nature of clients, and a prescribed approach with regard to eliciting client change is discouraged (Maniacci et al., 2014). Specific Adlerian techniques include but are not limited to modeling, guessing, pattern recognition, task setting, early recollections, dream interpretation, questioning, family sculpting, confrontation, and ‘spitting in the soup’ (Maniacci et al., 2014). Although I appreciate the value of each of the aforementioned techniques, ultimately I consider encouragement, lifestyle assessment, and questioning as being the most appropriate techniques to implement in a school setting.

A technical term in AP, encouragement refers to the process of helping the client develop courage and the willingness to take risks (Maniacci et al., 2014). As psychopathology is a result of experiencing discouragement (Maniacci et al., 2014), Adlerians believe that encouragement elicits change and ultimately leads to well-adjusted functioning. According to Maniacci et al. (2014), this technique involves “reflecting feelings, offering gentle prompts to try again, showing faith in their abilities, accepting clients with their flaws and still demonstrating respect for them, and showing concern and interest” (p. 76). In the school setting, I believe that encouragement is an effective technique to use not only in building rapport with students but also insofar as
helping students work toward achieving their goals is concerned, regardless of whether these goals are related to behavior, social-emotional, or academic functioning. According to Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2008), encouragement is considered “the key component to helping students help themselves” (p. 456). This technique thus instills in students a sense of independence, which I believe is necessary for the development of optimal functioning, both inside and outside of school. Finally, encouragement promotes a sense of belonging within the school environment, which simultaneously promotes academic success and social-emotional well-being (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008).

Questioning is another Adlerian technique that lends itself to being implemented in the school setting. Maniacci et al. (2014) hold that this particular technique serves two main purposes: it sheds light on what the client may potentially be avoiding and it serves as a basis for differential diagnosis. A client’s answer to the therapist’s question provides insight with regard to the client’s coping strategies as well to whether the client’s presenting problems are physiological or psychogenic (Bitter, 2007). Thus questioning also helps the therapist determine the most appropriate treatment. This technique is not confrontational but rather supportive and empathic in nature (Maniacci et al., 2014); as such, it guides the therapist and client in a collaborative exploration of the client’s experiences and functioning and, in my opinion, is an essential tool for a school psychologist.

Lifestyle assessment is yet another technique that is characteristic of Adlerian counseling. According to Maniacci et al. (2014), the goal of lifestyle assessment is to provide “a comprehensive picture of the client’s subjective experience” (p. 83). The subjective experience includes the client’s perceptions of his or her personal development, past experiences, gender, culture, resources, and constraints (Bitter, 2007), awareness of which enhances the therapist’s
overall understanding of the client. Early recollections, another Adlerian technique, can be used alongside an individual’s lifestyle assessment to further educate the therapist with regard to a client’s perceptions and functioning. By comparing the client’s early recollections to his or her current experiences and actions, the therapist can help the client detect patterns of behavior, set goals for himself, and ultimately foster change (Maniacci et al., 2014). Although school psychologists often administer objective psychoeducational assessments in their work with students, I believe that the subjective aspect of the lifestyle assessment lends itself to be implemented in the school setting as it ensures that the holistic nature of each child is taken into consideration with regard to diagnosing and designing interventions.

**Other Therapeutic Interventions.** The forms of therapy that proponents of AP implement are also diverse. According to Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2008), “Adlerian counselors are experienced in a variety of modalities, including individual counseling, group counseling, play therapy, and psychoeducational formats” (p. 450). Each of these modalities can easily be practiced within the school setting. School counselors are in a position not only to help individual students, but also to work toward improving the educational environment and social climate (Froeschle & Riney, 2008). In particular, the integration of art therapy and Individual Psychology has been found to minimize social and physical aggression and improve peer relationships within the school setting; this combination also leads students to self-reflection and social interest (Froeschle & Riney, 2008). The effects of Adlerian play therapy have also been noted, especially with regard to facilitating change in individual students. Using play, art, and storytelling, school counselors can obtain a better understanding of a child’s misbehavior and ultimately help him or her set and work toward achieving more positive goals (Kottman, 2001). I believe that being skilled in implementing a range of therapeutic modalities within the school
setting will prepare me for working with the diverse population of students that I will encounter as a school psychologist.

**Success.** In AP, success is not related to finding a cure for a client’s presenting problems (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). Instead, the Adlerian definition of success refers to how well a client modifies his or her lifestyle and effectively meets the demands of his or her life tasks (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). Kottman (2001) holds that AP is based upon four distinct goals: establishing a therapeutic relationship, obtaining the client’s lifestyle information, guiding the client in understanding his or her lifestyle, and instilling in the client skills that will enable him or her to transfer what he or she has learned beyond the therapeutic context. When the therapist helps the client meet each of these goals, the therapeutic process is considered to have been successful.

**Contextual Factors**

**Diversity.** Unlike his predecessor Freud, Adler himself did not narrow his therapeutic focus to specific individuals; instead, he is credited with having worked with a wide range of clients including individuals of lower socioeconomic status (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012) as well as those with severe neuroses and even criminal behavior (Maniaci et al., 2014). Today, AP is a form of therapy that can be implemented with a variety of populations. In particular, the lifestyle assessment that is characteristic of AP helps counselors understand clients’ perspectives and worldviews (Maniaci et al., 2014). Further, the inquiry-based nature of this form of therapy educates the counselor with regard to many cultures and races as it seeks to investigate an individual’s past experiences, family values, social context, educational context, as well as cultural and religious factors (Maniaci et al., 2014). Based upon social equality and egalitarianism (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012), AP is thus a theory that can be
applied to a counselor’s work with children, couples, families, and individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In fact, Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2008) hold that “Individual Psychology’s focus on understanding each student from his or her unique perspective fits well with diverse school populations, and it is consistent with the goals of multiculturalism” (p. 450).

**Different Contexts.** Adlerian psychotherapy is a form of therapy that can be successfully implemented across a variety of settings. Maniacci et al. (2014) hold that the most common settings in which the practice of AP can be found includes private practice, schools, education centers, hospitals, and clinics. In the school setting, AP is not limited to counseling students. Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2008) hold that school counselors can apply Adlerian theory to their work with teachers, parents, and administrators to elicit change within the school community. In particular, using encouragement to create prosocial classroom environments and helping educational personnel focus on effort and progress instead of grades and scores are two proposed action plans that a school counselor can implement (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). According to Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2008), “Adlerian theory provides a framework for professional school counselors in the multifaceted responsibilities associated with their positions” (p. 464).

**Reflection**

**Weaknesses of my Personal Theory**

My personal theory of counseling contains two main weaknesses. First, because AP is predicated upon understanding an individual’s subjective experience (Maniacci et al., 2014), adopting this perspective of counseling as a school psychologist may have its limitations, particularly insofar as assessment is concerned. Often, school psychologists assess, diagnose, and recommend interventions for one client before moving onto the next; although AP is considered
psychoeducational (Watts, 2000) and thus lends itself to the assessment process, sometimes this process, in my opinion, requires objectivity in addition to – or instead of - subjectivity.

The second weakness of drawing on Adlerian theory to form my own personal framework is the limited amount of empirical research supporting the efficacy of this approach (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). This has important implications for my practice as a school psychologist, especially with regard to the recommendation and possible implementation of interventions. According to Maniacci et al. (2014), “The field of psychology has moved toward an evidence-based approach to provide the best treatment for clients” (p. 82). Although many counselors and psychologists adopt an Adlerian theory of counseling, in order to establish its efficacy, this form of therapy ultimately requires additional research (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012).

**Why I am Drawn to this Theory**

I am drawn to an Adlerian theory of counseling particularly because of this theory’s emphasis on the holistic nature of the client. As an educator who has worked with children and adolescents for the past ten years, I believe that it is so incredibly important to take into consideration everything about that child, including his past experiences, family life, cultural background, and his perceptions of his relationships with others. Doing so ensures that the therapist has a thorough understanding of the child before he or she considers a diagnosis and recommends or implements therapeutic interventions. In addition, I appreciate the fact that Adlerians deemphasize psychopathology (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012), and instead view maladaptive behavior and symptoms as result of an individual not meeting his or her life tasks and subsequently becoming discouraged (Maniacci et al., 2014). Finally, the practical nature of the Adlerian counseling practice as well as the therapeutic techniques that
characterize it are straight-forward and, in my opinion, can be easily implemented in a school setting.

**Conclusion**

As a future school psychologist, the Adlerian perspective of counseling appeals to me for a variety of reasons. In particular, I appreciate the lens through which Adlerian counselors view human beings: as holistic, socially-embedded, goal-directed individuals who constantly strive to move forward (Ballou, 2002; Maniacci et al., 2014). Further, the philosophical assumptions on which human nature, healthy functioning, pathology, and change are based will forever hold a place in my personal theory of counseling and shape the way in which I understand the children with whom I work. In addition, the emphasis that Adlerians place on the collaborative client-counselor relationship is completely aligned with my beliefs insofar as the therapeutic experience is concerned. As my ultimate goal is to work in a school setting with children and adolescents, I believe that adopting the Adlerian perspective of psychotherapy will enhance my work as a school psychologist by helping me establish a foundation on which I can recommend and implement appropriate and effective therapeutic interventions. Finally, because students come from diverse backgrounds and bring with them diverse experiences, I believe that working from an Adlerian perspective will ultimately help me meet their needs and support them in their pursuit of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success and overall healthy functioning.
References


