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In the early years of psychotherapy monumental decisions were made in Vienna as to whose ideas were important and should be pursued and developed in this exciting new field. The therapy pioneers seemed to have been taken by the ideas of Sigmund Freud, rather than his colleague, Alfred Adler, and chose to study:

- what might be happening within the person;
- how to understand and fix people's problems;
- the sex instinct as the most important variable in understanding people;
- the biological over the social context;

I often wonder what might have occurred if Alfred Adler's ideas were the ones that were chosen.

For example, Freud advocated having his patients recline on a couch, while Adler plucked his clients off the couch and into chairs that faced one another. Adler believed in horizontal or equal relationships, while Freud accepted the vertical or superior-inferior view of the times. Adler enjoyed talking and listening to his patients. He saw them as capable of participating in the solving of their problems.

Many of Freud's patients were wealthy and privileged, while Adler treated everyone, including common people or those from the working class. He even treated the "freaks" of society as his office was near where the circus performers lived, so they became his clients.

Freud focused on individuals and their unique problems while Adler saw all behavior as universal and saw people as alike or similar. Adler also noted the importance of the context in which people lived or worked, for example, that many of those who worked in the tailoring industry became blind as they aged and discovered that this could be avoided with better lighting, more breaks, fewer work hours, and better ventilation.

Freud saw his patients in the seclusion and privacy of his consulting room. Adler also saw patients individually, but he also believed that therapy could be delivered to the public. Because Adler saw problems as universal and similar, he would often work with people on a stage or in an auditorium full of people. Those in the audience could watch a demonstration family talk about problems and, through "spectator therapy", could learn how to deal with their own similar difficulties.

Adler's ideas were more positive about potential growth and based in encouragement. He tended to look for what was right and working in his clients' lives and could be credited as the originator...
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of positive psychology. At one staff conference Adler supposedly listened to his colleagues discussing a patient’s myriad problems and the deep-rooted nature of his psychopathology when he boldly stated, “That is not what I see.” When urged to explain himself, Adler stated that he saw a person who was trying very hard to belong and to fit in with others. This patient was discouraged and did not believe there was a positive way to belong so he has chosen to find his place in a negative manner and to engage in socially inappropriate behavior. In essence, he became the best at being bad. Adler focused on the assets of people and not their liabilities.

Perhaps the most significant difference was that Freud and his followers studied people as though they were a collection of parts, such as the id, ego and super ego. Adler viewed people as a whole and recognized that individual components must be understood as to how they relate to the whole person and that a person’s functioning could not be fully understood solely in terms of his or her component parts. As an holistic psychology, Adlerians focus on the unity of behavior. All behavior is seen as goal directed and moving from a “felt minus” to a “perceived plus.”

The psychotherapy profession seems to have gotten off on the wrong foot by choosing to spend so much time and energy on classifying and fixing what was disturbing or broken rather than learning how to facilitate healthy and optimal forms of behavior. The field became overly focused on mental illness and disregarded the notion of health. Focusing on wellness, growth, and optimal wellbeing would have taken the world of psychotherapy in a much different, and hopefully more positive, direction. Adler’s focus on the importance of encouragement and the positive never really caught on until more recently with the positive psychology movement.

The depth of this mistake can be understood when we sadly realize that only a few people in the healthcare industry have ever had a class, let alone advanced training, in health. Most practitioners have been trained in understanding and identifying problems, mistakes and pathology. Research on the common factors of change in psychotherapy has identified the client’s strengths as a most significant factor. Other important variables are the ability to generate hope and to relate well to others. Therapists who can help clients see, value and use their own strengths will be more effective.

Adler’s original ideas are the basis of so many of today’s approaches to helping. What would have happened if people were to understand his complete approach? Adler’s ideas are also at the heart of most of the contemporary or neo-Freudian approaches to helping. There was so much similarity that one person even suggested that these approaches should correctly be called neo-Adlerian. These leading contemporary approaches stressed social relations and not the biological factors, striving for self-actualization and not being driven by the sex instinct; a subjective rather than objective approach to helping; and the present rather than the impact of early experiences. Adler stressed the importance of the relationship and using empathy as a key strategy for helping. Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) showed how Adler’s approach was at the root of existential, phenomenological, schema, humanistic and person-centered approaches. Yet, no one seemed to listen or care.

Abraham Maslow is credited with creating humanistic and transpersonal approaches to psychotherapy. He studied with Adler and urged others during his lifetime to understand the practical brilliance of Adler’s ways of understanding and helping others. Maslow, like Adler, worked to help the profession change its focus and to study what is possible and helping people to use more of their potential.

The words of contemporary Adlerian Richards Watts serve to summarize: “Adlerian psychology and psychotherapy was the first positive psychology and approach to therapy that emphasized prevention, optimism and hope, resilience and growth, competence, creativity and resourcefulness, social consciousness, and finding meaning and a sense of community in relationships. It was the original strength-based approach.”

Whether or not they identify...
themselves as Adlerians, nearly all contemporary counseling approaches now reflect many of Adler’s concepts:

- The crucial importance an egalitarian, respectful, and cooperative counselor-client relationship (therapeutic alliance);
- The focus on social equality and social justice;
- The real or perceived impact of early childhood/family constellation (system) experiences on current functioning;
- The importance of taking a holistic approach that considers mind, body, and spirit;
- The need to view people contextually; in their family, social, and cultural contexts;
- The recognition that thinking influences emotions and behavior;
- The emphasis on strengths, optimism, encouragement, empowerment, advocacy, and support;
- The relevance of style of life and goals;
- The need to identify, understand the purpose of, and modify repetitive self-defeating behaviors;
- The importance and benefit of clinicians and clients developing realistic and mutually-agreed-upon counseling goals (goal alignment);
- The recognition that having problems, difficulties, and differences is a normal part of life and can be viewed as opportunities for growth rather than “pathology”;
- The view that counseling and psychotherapy is an educational, preventative, and growth-promoting process, not merely a remedial one. (Watts & LaGuardia, 2015).

The most significant developments in the field of psychotherapy in the last 100 years seemed to have been ignored. I wonder how many more years will pass before people re-discover Adler’s wisdom and begin to embrace his complete theory and approach rather than just bits and pieces? We miss so many opportunities by not understanding health and having a positive focus in our relationships with others. I am not optimistic as most psychotherapists are busy looking for ways to justify their not so effective ideas or to discover what will be the next panacea while failing to understand what has come before them.

References:


About the author

Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD, ABPP is Distinguished Professor of Adlerian Psychology at Adler University in Chicago and psychologist at the Wellness Clinic in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. He has authored over 60 books, 175 articles and book chapters and created 300 professional training videos. Jon has received lifetime achievement awards from several organizations including the American Psychological Association, the American Counseling Association and the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology. Jon was formally trained in Adlerian psychology at the Alfred Adler Institute in Chicago where he received the Certificate of Psychotherapy and his doctorate in clinical psychology. He served as the Editor of what is now the Journal of Individual Psychology for seventeen years and the International Journal of Individual Psychology. Several of his books are among the main texts in Adlerian psychology and he has five commercially available videos demonstrating Adlerian psychotherapy with individual clients, couples, parents and teachers.