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Exploring the Inferiority Model in Adlerian Psychotherapy

Alfred Adler once afflicted with inferiority due to organ inferiority, became the founding father of Individual/Adlerian psychology. Adlerian psychotherapy spans numerous contemporary theories in psychology. Adlerian psychotherapy is a holistic, phenomenological, optimistic and socially entrenched theory, on how everyone interprets themselves and others within the society they live (Maniacci & Sackett-Maniacci, 2019). An overview will be provided of where one of Adler's most important assumptions, inferiority, fits within the Adlerian theory. Given such, the negative responses to inferiority: inferiority complex and superiority complex will be discussed, followed by socially useful type of inferiority. After that, inferiority as a specific element will be examined in relation to key principles of Adlerian theory. Next, a discussion on the different theoretical underpinnings of Adlerian theory and Freudian theory. Concluding with how Adlerian theory can continue to flourish in the modern social climate.

Inferiority Within Adlerian Theory

To understand where inferiority places within Adlerian theory it is important to talk about the aspects of lifestyle which account for people's behavior and motivations towards the future. Personality is governed by what Adler calls lifestyle, that is, the temperament, the personality traits and, psychological and biological processes placed within a social matrix. The development of personality also includes the degree of activity an individual has, organ inferiority, birth order and sibling relationships, family values, family atmosphere, and parenting style. The lifestyle provides what Adler describes as a blueprint for the recurring patterns people experience in life, such as acting defensively to criticism or becoming anxious in social gatherings (Maniacci, & Sackett-Maniacci, 2019). The desire of affirmation is a term that Adler used to deal with contradictions between the two fundamental motivating forces, striving for

superiority and, the striving for social belonging, within his theory. The end goal in the striving for superiority is for an individual to be the master of their environment not the master of others but the obstacles situations and tasks of life (Ferguson, 2020).

Adlerian psychotherapy is a contemporary psychodynamic theory which is governed by five postulates based on (1) unconscious aspects of mental life including thoughts, feelings and motives (2) mental process operate in parallel to motivate people to gain solutions to challenges (3) personality patterns and personality development that formed early in childhood before the age of four (4) mental representations of self, others and relationships and how these interactions can influence psychopathology and (5) personality development so that people can become socially dependent, independent and mature (Westen, 1998). The most relatable postulate for Adlerian theory would be the fourth, that mental representations of self, others and relationships and these interactions influence the psychological problems that people suffer from. This postulate plays a crucial role in intimate relationship forming and peoples place within society (Westen, 1998). When an individual has a disconnect between self internal thoughts and their relationship with others, then they use the feelings of inferiority that they are experiencing as a motivation to strive for perfection. It is when people unable to deal with life's challenges and relationships with others that inferiority complexes and superiority complexes occur.

As stated in Overholser (2010), inferiority is not a disease. The whole premise of inferiority within the Adlerian theory is a cyclic one, in that, inferiority feelings lead to striving to reduce the feelings of inferiority, to once again feeling inferior and striving once more. Inferiority is a stimulant to a healthy human behavior which is goal orientated for perfection (Overholser, 2010). Perfection is derived from a Latin word meaning to complete or to finish (Schultz & Schultz, 2017). From this meaning, the striving for perfection by the reduction of

inferiority feelings makes individuals have a greater sense of competence for themselves, by making themselves whole or complete (Schultz & Schultz, 2017) and others, in the form of a social interest (Sabates, 2020). This striving for perfection could manifest itself being empathic to a struggling neighbour, by helping them find community recourses for support. The strengths an individual has within themselves can be used to help others, such as doing community in-person or online reading classes for children or adults. Both applications increase social interest and wholeness in an individual.

Inferiority and Superiority Complex

In both inferiority complexes and superiority complexes, compensations are safeguards for a person who feels too weak to face the problems of life and that all motions are towards the suppression of others (Overholser, 2010). Inferiorty and superiority complexes, are conditions that develop when a person is either unable to compensate for normal inferiority feelings or overcompensates for normal inferiority feelings (Schultz & Schultz, 2017). Both complexes are born out of poor self image which prevents successful problem solving (Infinity Institute, n.d) and are created during childhood (Adler, 2019). There is an emphasis within the Adlerian theory that each individual has a need to connect and belong and is driven to feel significant and part of society (Cherry, 2021). The lifestyle, and how people attempt to cope with the perceived feelings of inferiority, create a distinctive aspect of their personality functioning. It is when these coping strategies go awry that inferiority complexes and superiority complexes become apparent (Cervone & Pervin, 2019).

There are three noted types of individuals that exhibit certain styles of life: the dominant/ruling type, the getting type and the avoiding type. The dominant or ruling type is the superiority complex, with an individual overcompensating for their perceived feelings of

inferiority (Schultz & Schultz, 2017). The ruling type exhibits low social interest and are classed as asocial. Ruling types, compensate for their feelings of inferiority by dominating and have an anti social presence in society. By being antisocial they can act on their own terms thereby seeking and getting gratification which, they did not get at some point in their early childhood, during a time where they experienced having little to no power (Wissing, 2018). Most associated as tyrants, drug addicts and prone to suicide (Adler, 2019). Abramson (2015) states that people perceive social life in a vertical view, an imaginary ladder. These individuals are the ruling type with a view that they are in competition, moving from that minus state to the positive state of inferiority feelings. They often suffer with neurosis as they exhibit black and white thinking patterns: when they succeed, they feel valuable, when they do not, they feel worthless and inferior, with no sense of belonging. This vertical stance of inferiority feelings causes an uphill battle towards the highest stance in that individual's life. The sense of belonging within society depends on others, and their own values and place within society, therefore they have an underdeveloped social interest (Abramson, 2015).

The getting type is an inferiority complex prompting neurosis and psychosis. Often noted as pampered in that they are unable to meet their own needs and therefore have others do things and get things for them. The feelings of inferiority that they experience are the inability to solve problems by themselves and compensating by getting people to do things for them. The avoiding type is also an inferiority complex that causes neurosis and psychosis as an expression of their shock to their feelings of inferiority. Exhibiting low social interaction which may have stemmed from childhood feelings of never being perfect by overbearing parents. The avoiding type, compensate for their feelings of inferiority or feeling like a failure by avoiding social interaction (Wissing, 2018). In a recent study by Kolisnyk et al. (2020), participants were assessed for

superior or inferior complexes using Adlerian assessment tools. The study found a negative correlation between inferiority complexes and age, which may suggest that inferiority complexes reduce as we age maybe partly due to learning appropriate tools to deal in a healthy way with the feelings of inferiority, which is the source of all human striving.

Socially Useful Inferiority

In addition to the three types of lifestyles discussed above, there is one type which is classed as the socially useful type. The socially useful type can be seen as a horizontal view on how individuals perceive social life. This socially useful type, believe that all human beings are equal. For them to succeed they need to be in cooperation with others not being perceived higher than others but perceived on the same plane as them. These horizontalists, have the sense of belonging dependent on themselves alone, that is, being able to contribute to society is always on their shoulders and in their hands. They have a high and well-developed social interest, and would probably embody the phrase “without others, the human is worthless, inferior” (Abramson, 2015, p. 429). The socially useful type also has a social feeling that is based on two interdependent aspects: the need to belong and the goal of contribution. It is these two intertwined aspects that maintain a healthy human society and healthy individuals within it (Ferguson, 2020).

Adlerian Principal Alignment

There are twelve key principles which act as basic assumptions within Adlerian psychotherapy, however, five of those principles have a direct pull towards the concept of inferiority, and include holism, phenomenology, motivation as striving, psychology of use and acting as if. Holism attests that people should not be broken into parts and should be considered within their social context. This is important with regards to inferiority, especially as feelings of

inferiority occur towards the other, outwardly towards the environment and therefore the social context. The term phenomenology asserts that individuals behave according to the way they perceive their worlds, therefore Adlerian therapist engage in the study of experience (Gladding, 2018). Phenomenology is important in understanding how an individual perceive their feelings of inferiority and how they act upon them, whether in a socially useful way or in a negative manner. Through understanding their world, a therapeutic relationship can facilitate change. Motivation as striving given by its name and what inferiority pertains to, that is the striving to overcome the feelings of inferiority. This principle relates to the perception of a negative to a positive situation such as going from a neglected situation to a secure one or from inferior situation to a superior situation. Adler saw this as a growth model of human nature, with striving being the principal objective and tension being produced when an individual could not achieve their goals. The psychology of use principle is focused on how people use their symptoms, fears, ailments and such to control others, this is of important when looking out the three main lifestyle types, ruling, getting, avoiding. In the ruling type, the feelings of inferiority are used to dominate others, in the getting type they are used to get things from others and in the avoiding type they are used to avoid any social interactions (Wissing, 2018). In the key principle acting as if, the lifestyle consists of four main components: the self concept, the self ideal, worldview, and ethical convictions. The self concept is concerned with who an individual is, whereas the self ideal is focused on who an individual should be. All wrapped up in an individual's worldview and ethical convictions. Inferiority feelings can occur when there are discrepancies between the self concept and the self ideal. (Maniacci, & Sackett-Maniacci, 2019).

An important point to make concerning all the key principles, is that each individual must be seen as just that. The idiosyncratic model of Adlerian theory makes the self-concept and the self-

ideal unique to each individual (Maniacci, & Sackett-Maniacci, 2019). Everyone has a different meaning of, and attitude towards what constitutes success and as Adler (2019) states, “each individual must be studied within the light of their own peculiar development” (p. 186).

Freudian Theory Underpinnings

Adler’s principles are inherently rooted within the Freudian perspectives of human behavior. Adler disagreed with Freud’s thoughts that the unconscious as a separate entity to the conscious, to ensure that threat and incorrect social or cultural impulses are not acted upon (Safran, 2019). Adler moved away from Freud’s theory as excessive emphasis was placed on sexual instincts, taking another view that was based on social urges and conscious thoughts in that individuals experience the feeling of inferiority which motivates them to compensate for any painful inferiority. These repeated cycles of inferiority followed by motivation towards no feelings of inferiority form a distinct aspect of an individual's personality, becoming part of their lifestyle (Cervone, D., & Pervin, 2019). In Freudian theory human behavior is attributed to the past where in Adlerian theory human motivation is towards the future (Schultz & Schultz, 2017). It is stated that Adler borrowed many terms from his time spent with Freud but change the terms to mean something different to relate to his own theory. For example, the term neurosis in a Freudian sense relate to childhood trauma, internal conflicts and early fixations. In an Adlerian sense neurosis is the retreating from life tasks: work, friendship and love, attributed to failing to develop social interest, low self esteem and avoiding inferiority feelings (Abramson, 2015).

Conclusion

Hopefully this paper has shone a light on the important aspect of inferiority within the Adlerian theory. It is a concept that once understand in its completeness, is something that is easy to apply and see in action all around and in the future of counselling psychology. As

inferiority is seen as a weakness across society, maybe a shift in a paradigm in a social context could alleviate many of the negative aspects of inferiority, making a more horizontal social interest, embodied by all human beings. This could allow for free communication to reach the goal of superiority faster, creating equilibrium in people. The next generation can look at Adlerian theory as a preventative method by increasing the degree of social feeling and cooperation to help mitigate the need for therapy for underdeveloped issues in inferiority (Adler, 2019).

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