

Individual Psychology Theory: A Case Study Review of Billy Madison

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### Abstract

Discussed herein is a case review of the fictional character Billy Madison, through the therapeutic theoretical perspective of Individual Psychology (IP) theory. Although empirical research of IP theory efficacy is little to none, there are studies albeit dated, that demonstrate positive therapeutic outcomes. Components of IP theory are outlined herein, such as but not limited to, the developer of IP theory, interventions of IP theory that seem to fit the client's symptomatology, and a psychospiritual comparison between IP theory and Christianity. A conclusion is provided on IP theories efficacy in treating the fictional client Billy Madison.

### Individual Psychology Theory: A Case Study Review of Billy Madison

Although there are a number of therapeutic theoretical orientations worth considering when approaching a client, Individual Psychology (IP) seems to be a promising theory for this client. IP theory is equipped with a variety of therapeutic techniques that may be beneficial. Additionally, IP theory addresses the client from childhood which, for this client, is a domain that should be explored. Although IP theory has a variety of tools at the therapist's disposal, the client's willingness to engage in the therapeutic alliance will determine their success or failure.

#### **Case Conceptualization Using Individual Psychology**

IP is very versatile and has many techniques that the therapist may use within the therapeutic alliance. IP covers the majority of the individual's lifespan from the early childhood stages well into adulthood (Murdock, 2017). Even though empirical support of IP efficacy is limited (Murdock, 2017), the IP theory's foundational philosophical approach and central construct appear to align well to the client's presenting problems.

#### **Developer of Individual Psychology Theory**

Despite suffering from rickets, having difficulty with speech related to vocal cord issues, and being characterized as frail, weak and fearful, Alfred Adler went on to become the founder of IP (Murdock, 2017). Born in 1870 to a middle-class Jewish family from Vienna, Austria as one of six children, Alfred nearly passed away from a debilitating bout of pneumonia at the age of five. It was said that Adler used his various biophysiological issues and near-death experience as motivation to become a physician (Murdock, 2017). Adler unfortunately passed in 1937 at the age of 67 on a lecture tour in Aberdeen, Scotland (Murdock, 2017). To this day, one can observe the breadth of Adler's contribution to the work of psychology and psychotherapy. Many

theoretical orientations have manifested from the roots of Adlerian theory, such as reality therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, and family systems theory (Murdock, 2017).

### **Human Nature and the Counseling Process**

Whether it is called *will to power, striving for significance, or wish to overcome*, according to Adlerian theory, the most fundamental motivation of humans is an endeavor for superiority (Murdock, 2017). Unlike the psychoanalytic perspective, Adler believed that humans are not driven by innate, unconscious psychological processes but rather are being pulled towards their goals, namely, the quest for superiority (Murdock, 2017). Although Adler's primary motivation of humans is to seek superiority, Alder also spoke of another innate process: inferiority (Murdock, 2017). After revisions of Adler's initial perspective of feelings of inferiority, he later revised his perspective and concluded that feelings of inferiority manifested when one's journey for superiority becomes frustrated (Murdock, 2017). Adler identified a third innate process called "the need to belong," however, Adler never fully developed his position on this process (Murdock, 2017). This innate process can also be viewed as the need to survive. Adler thought, if infants are unable to take care of themselves in every regard, that the need to belong was critical to one's survival (Murdock, 2017).

Related to the therapy process, IP theory conceptualizes the process of therapy within four unique phases: 1.) establishing the relationship, 2.) assessment, 3.) interpretation and insight, and 4.) reorientation (Murdock, 2017). According to Adler, one of the most critical components of the therapy process is the relationship between the therapist and client. Alder insisted on the absolute necessity of the therapist empathizing with the client (Murdock, 2017). Furthermore, Adler deemed two other items critical in the therapeutic process: clear goals and

successfully delivering the idea to the client that they have the ability to change (Murdock, 2017).

### **Efficacy Provided Through Research**

Although IP theory has been around for decades, research support is limited. One can find most published research in the *Journal of Individual Psychology*. However, research published in this journal is considered controversial (Murdock, 2017). Given that the journal favors IP theory, questions of bias have surrounded published research therein (Murdock, 2017). Aside from the controversial issues of bias, another hinderance to IP theory research support is study scarcity. There are studies, albeit limited in number, that show support for IP theory outcome efficacy, but those studies are significantly dated. Those outcome studies include research conducted by Shlien, Mosak and Dreikurs (1962) and Zarski, Sweeney, and Barcikowski (1977). Although both studies show some support for IP theory, psychometrics used to capture efficacy are questionable. Lastly, to add to the issues of research-based efficacy, the studies purported to research IP theory constructs lack predictability power. In this regard, instead of providing a prediction and then testing their hypothesis, researchers would discover some phenomenon and provide an explanation on how it fits into IP theory (Murdock ,2017).

### **Most Effective Diagnoses with Individual Psychology**

In their research in providing an integration model between the Diagnostics Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III-R (DSM) (now known as DSM-V) and IP theory's broad psychopathologic classification, Sperry and Maniacci (1992) mention that Alder did not consider a diagnostic classification as essential. Rather, IP theory discusses the psychologically unhealthy in broader terms such as “neuroses” and “psychoses” which one could conclude are the diagnoses that IP is most effective with. Murdock (2017) does provide a degree of granularity

concerning IP theory's broad psychopathologic classifications. Murdock (2017) contributed a diagnosis of anxiety and depression to those who were classified with neurosis while attributing a diagnosis of schizophrenia and, arguably, paranoid personality disorder to those who were classified as psychotic under IP theory.

### **Appropriate for the Client**

IP theory covers a significant portion of an individual's life span, providing a developmental perspective from the birth of a child well into one's adult years. Given that the client is 27 years-of age, having issues a far back as childhood, IP theory would be an appropriate therapeutic theoretical orientation to utilize. Additionally, the client experienced a significant loss at an early age which may be a contributing factor to the client's present symptomology. IP theory is equipped with a central construct, what Adler called lifestyle, which takes into consideration an individual's childhood development (Murdock, 2017).

### **Ethical Issues that May Arise**

One of the main purposes for the client to attend therapy is that it was highly recommended by the client's father. There was a stipulation between the client and the client's father that if psychological, emotional, and educational progress is not made to the satisfaction of the father, then the client would jeopardize his prospects of becoming the next CEO of Madison Hotels. Given that IP theory is individualistic (Murdock, 2017), the main focus of the therapeutic process will be on the client's developmental progress. If the father is not invited into the therapeutic alliance, ethical issues could arise if the father makes inquiries of the client's progress.

## **Multicultural Issues**

Adler was well known to be one of the first theorist to acknowledge the impact of multicultural components and their effect on the individual. Moreover, Adlerian theory recognized the inequalities of sexes which perhaps led Adler to be an early advocate of equality between sexes. Provided that the client is a 27-year-old Caucasian male, multicultural issues regarding sexism will likely not be a problem. Additionally, IP theory heavily supports the notion of individual improvement. Primary constructs of IP theory focus on individual choice, and what is within an individual's control (Murdock, 2017). Given that most the client's presenting problems are individualistic in nature, IP theory shows little to no multicultural issues.

## **Individual Psychology for Crisis Situations**

While the client for this case has not reported a crisis, if a crisis situation were to ever occur, IP theory could be utilized to assist the client. Parikh and Morris (2011) discuss an integrative approach between IP theory and crisis theory (CT). Provided that IP theory and CT share similar phenomenological postulations of human development, it was suggested that IP's therapeutic techniques could be utilized for a crisis situation.

## **Interventions**

The client is a 27-year-old Caucasian male exhibiting significant delays academically, psychologically, and emotionally. The client's behavioral patterns resemble those of an adolescent. The client states that he would like to mature into a productive adult, but his behavior suggests otherwise. The client lacks a clear direction for his life and willfully does not consider consequences to his adolescent behavior. The client has a turbulent relationship with his father. Most of the turbulence in the client's relationship with his father is due to the client's unwillingness to mature into a healthy productive adult.

### Natural and Logical Consequences

IP theory suggests that to encourage an individual to take responsibility, allowing natural and logical consequences may be the best course of action (Murdock, 2017). In this case, natural consequences could easily be applied. The client's father could allow the client to continue his current trajectory and squander any remaining hope to become the heir of the father's fortune and the CEO of Madison Hotels. Logical consequences were already set in place for this particular case. There was an agreement with the client and the client's father, that if the client did not prove himself to be psychologically, emotionally, and academically fit, then the client would forfeit any chance of becoming the next CEO of Madison Hotel. Natural and logical consequences may help the client realize the severity of the situation when the client experiences said consequences.

### Acting as If

The client, being a 27-year-old male, behaviorally resembles an adolescent. The *acting as if* technique, proposed by IP theory, calls for the client to act accordingly to an "if only" statement (Murdock, 2017). For example, the client could ask himself, "If only I behaviorally, psychologically and emotionally behaved as a CEO," the client may alter his self-perception (Murdock, 2017). Additionally, the "if only" technique allows for the client to explore behaviors that the client has yet to discover (Murdock, 2017), which the client would benefit from in this case if he discovered he had similar CEO qualities to his father.

### Creating Images

The client's relationship with his father is shaky at best. The father has been pampering the client all the client's life and the client shows little to no respect for his father. This dynamic seems to be fostering an unhealthy relationship between the two. A therapeutic technique in the

toolkit of IP theory that could assist the client is *creating images* (Murdock, 2017). Creating images allows the client to review his faulty perceptions and goals. Perhaps having the client create images relating to his disrespect of his father may allow the client to realize the conflict between them.

### **Spiritual Application**

Given that the client does not take other dimensions of his life seriously, incorporating another dimension, namely spiritual, into the therapy process may prove to be difficult. As previously mentioned, the client behaves like an adolescent despite being 27 years old. Additionally, on account that the client has been overwhelmed with the severity of having to mature across multiple domains, it may be a good idea to approach spiritual matters differently. Perhaps, if the client was remotely interested in spirituality, then approaching it more lightheartedly may prove to be effective.

There is no debate that psychotherapy and Christianity have been at odds for decades (Jones & Butman, 2011; Kanz, 2001; Watts, 2000). If one were to strip each to their core, one could conclude both are very similar in striving to understand, help, and foster healthy biopsychosocial development for the individual (Jones & Butman, 2011). As each of these have an analogous foundational purpose, and no two philosophies are absolutely congruent, there will be both incompatibilities and compatibilities.

Speaking first on compatibilities, a main compatibility between IP theory and Christianity is the family's impact on one's individual biopsychosocial development. As discussed by Murdock (2017), the influence of the family upon an individual is critically important. Likewise, the Word of God references the importance of developing and training a child in accordance with

the principles of God's Kingdom so that when he matures, he will not go astray (Proverbs 22:6, AMP).

Another compatibility between IP theory and Christianity is in the matter of taking care of and caring about society rather than the self. IP theory maintains that an individual can be measured by the degree to which the individual cares for society (Murdock, 2017; Kanz, 2001). Additionally, discussed by Watts (2000), Alder's conceptualization of manifesting religion was the individual's social interest. Both of these statements from Murdock (2017), Kanz (2001) and Watts (2000) align seamlessly with God's Word cornering the outward love, care and compassion for society (Galatians 6:10, AMP; 1 Timothy 5:8, AMP; James 1:27, AMP; Ephesians 4:32, AMP; John 13:34-35, AMP; 1 John 3:17-18, AMP; Matthew 25:40, AMP).

A third compatibility between IP theory and Christianity surrounds a central component of the nature of IP theory: goals. Murdock (2017) and Watts (2000) outline that goals are utilized for the individual to self-evaluate their current life developmental patterns in hopes that they recognize their detrimental course and make the necessary corrections for a positive outcome. The concept of self-evaluation in the psychological level of analysis is also highly recommended by the Word of God. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Rome, encourages believers to evaluate their cognitions and if necessary, realign them to foster a healthy psychospiritual developmental outcome.

In regard to incompatibilities, as previously mentioned, no two philosophies will ever be absolutely harmonious. Between IP theory and Christianity, one will not be surprised to discover a number of incompatibilities. First, a critical incongruence is found between IP theory and Christianity's foundational philosophical orientation of the human condition. IP theory purports that humans can be inherently good or bad (Murdock, 2017; Kanz, 2001) while Christianity

maintains that all of humanity are inherently sinful and have wicked hearts (Psalm 51:5, AMP; Romans 5:12-21, AMP; Jeremiah 17:9, AMP).

Secondly, IP theorists claim that, by the age of 5, an individual's life trajectory, based off of several variables, is well established to carry throughout the rest of their life and is difficult to change (Murdock, 2017). Although one can find various doctrinal positions related to predestination within Christianity, a common position held by the Pentecostal denomination and some that claim non-denominationalism, is that of individual free will. The Word of God makes clear that an individual, if they will, has the ability to change the course of their life with a simple decision, regardless of their childhood development (2 Corinthians 5:17, AMP; Matthew 8:2-4, AMP; Deuteronomy 30:19, AMP; Isaiah 1:19, AMP; Deuteronomy 28:1, AMP).

Lastly, a third incompatibility between IP theory and Christianity surrounds a therapeutic technique of IP: paradoxical intention (Murdock, 2017). Paradoxical intention encourages the individual to intensify the maladaptive behavior. In regards to Christianity, if one is struggling with a sexual addiction, the Word of God does not suggest that the individual should intensify that behavior but rather seek God's forgiveness and strength to overcome (1 John 1:9, AMP; Ephesians 6:11, AMP).

## Conclusion

The literature has indicated that IP theory is applicable for a variety of psychopathologies (Murdock, 2017; Sperry & Maniacci, 1992). With reference to this client, his presenting symptomology is within the scope of IP theory's psychotherapy toolkit. While the client is exhibiting symptoms of the peter pan condition (Peterson, 2017), the client could see a dramatic positive change undergoing IP therapy. The most challenging facet, in this case, would be helping the client understand the consequences of both his actions and inactions. Among IP

theory's therapeutic techniques, paradoxical intention and natural and logical consequences could prove fairly successful in this regard. Even though the client has been resistant to previous suggested treatments, IP theory looks to be a promising therapeutic orientation for this client.

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