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Adlerian Individual Psychology Counselling Theory: Implications for the Nigeria Context

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author KUG conceptualized the idea and author JMOG did the literature search, whereas both authors jointly developed the paper by comparing notes at various phases. They also read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Counseling is a helping relationship involving a client or clients and a professional counselor; while a counseling theory is a postulation put forward to guide the counselor in the process of helping a client with a maladjustment problem. Thus, this paper has x-rayed Alfred Adler's "Individual psychology" counseling theory; covering issues such as concepts and view of human nature; Adler's explanation of abnormal behaviours, goal of therapy, therapeutic techniques as well as the criticisms and merits of the Adlerian individual psychology and concluded with the implications and applicability of the theory to Nigeria life situation.

Keywords: Adlerian; psychology; counseling; theory; Nigeria context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Counseling as a concept has been defined as a learning process in which a person (client) who has behavioural or adjustment problem is helped by a professional (Counsellor) to behave in a rewarding manner. Counseling involves a face to face or person to person interaction aimed at assisting "normal" individuals to overcome their stressful incapacitating situations. Meanwhile a theory is an attempt at synthesizing and integrating empirical data for maximum clarification and unification. A theory permits the postulation and prediction of the occurrence of phenomena, and acts as a guide to discovering new facts [1]. Therefore a counseling theory is an individual's view of the nature of man to serve as a guide in helping troubled people [2,3]. Hence among numerous counseling theories, Alfred Adler's individual psychology has stood out in its contribution to the practice of counselling and psychotherapy.

A look into his origin reveals that Alfred Adler was born in the suburbs of Vienna in 1870, the third child and second son of a Jewish grain merchant and his wife. As a child, Alfred developed rickets, which kept him from walking until he was four years old; and at five, he nearly died of pneumonia. It was however reported that he resolved to be a physician at about this age [4].

Alfred was an average student and preferred playing outdoors to being cooped up in school. He was quite outgoing, popular, and active, and was known for his efforts at outdoing his older brother, Sigmund [5]. He later received a medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1895. During his college years, he became attached to a group of socialist students, among whom he found his wife-to-be, Raissa Timofeyewa Epstein who was an intellectual and social activist from Russia studying in Vienna. They got married in 1897, had four children, two of whom became psychiatrists. Alfred began his medical career as an ophthalmologist, but soon switched to general practice, and established his office in a lower-class part of Vienna, across from the Prater, a combination amusement park and circus.

Cooper [6] noted that the unusual strengths and weaknesses of the performers led to his insight into organ inferiorities and compensation. He then turned to psychiatry, and in 1907 was invited to join Freud's discussion group. After writing papers on organic inferiority, which were

quite compatible with Freud's views, Alfred wrote, first, a paper concerning an aggression instinct, which Freud did not approve of, and then a paper on children's feelings of inferiority, which suggested that Freud's sexual notions be taken more metaphorically than literally [4].

Carew Alfred [7] noted that although Freud named Adler the president of the Viennese Analytic Society and the co-editor of the organization's newsletter, Adler did not stop his criticism. A debate between Adler's supporters and Freud's was arranged, but it resulted in Adler, with nine others resigning to establish the society for Free Psychoanalysis in 1911. This organization became *The Society for Individual Psychology* in 1912. During World War I, Adler served as a physician in the Austrian Army, first on the Russian front and later in a children's hospital. He saw first-hand the damage that war does, and his thought turned increasingly to the concept of social interest. He felt that if humanity was to survive, it had to change its ways.

After the war, he was involved in various projects, including clinics attached to state schools and the training of teachers. In 1926, as noted by [8], he went to the United States to lecture, and he eventually accepted a visiting position at the Long Island College of Medicine. In 1934, he and his family left Vienna finally. [2] noted that while in USA, Adler's Individual Psychology won a large followership such as Donald Dinkmeyer, Martin Sontesgard, and Rudolph Preikurs who were most prominent. However, on May 28, 1937, during a series of lectures at Aberdeen University in Scotland, Alfred Adler died of a heart attack.

Boeree [4] noted that for the fact that some people (e.g. Theodore Roosevelt, a former USA president) so sickly at childhood should later become so healthy, vigorous, and successful; that some children, sickly or not, thrive, while others wither away; is the drive that Roosevelt had peculiar to him, or is it something that ties in each of us? These kinds of questions intrigued Alfred Adler, and led him to developing his theory called *Individual Psychology*. This theory was chosen to represent his conception of man as a holistic individual. Adler as observed by [9] saw man as working towards his life goal, which is a goal an individual chooses and for which he develops characteristic ways of attempting to reach that goal. Adler places emphasis on the importance of the individual and his interaction with the environment; and neither environment

nor heredity determines behavior solely, but the interaction of the environment, heredity and the individual does.

In view of this fact, this paper looked at: the basic tenets of individual Psychology, Adler's central concepts and views of human nature, his explanations of abnormal behaviours, and goals of therapy, therapeutic techniques of the approach and applicability of the theory to Nigerian life situation.

2. BASIC TENETS OF INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

1. ***The Individual is seen as a unified and self-consistent entity:*** The term "individual" stem from the Latin sense "indivisible". To Adler, no life expression can be viewed in isolation, but must always be regarded in relation to the total personality. The person is an indivisible unit both in mind and body and to the various activities and functions of the mind.
2. ***Human life as a dynamic force striving for perfection:*** Adler postulates a single "drive" or motivating force behind all our behavior and experience. By the time his theory had gelled into its most mature form, he called that motivating force, the "striving for perfection". It is the desire we all have to fulfill our potentials to come closer and closer to our ideal.
3. ***Teleology:*** Adler sees motivation as a matter of moving towards the future, rather than being driven, mechanistically by the past. We are drawn towards our goals, our purposes, our ideals; this is called teleology. Thus teleology acknowledges that life is hard and uncertain, but it always has room for change!
4. ***The Individual is seen as a creative and self-determined entity:*** To him, people possess creative power, which places them in control of their life; conscious activity is the defining character of human beings. This creative power affects virtually every facet of the person's existence — perception, memory, imagination, fantasy and dreaming.
5. ***The social embeddedness of the individual:*** Adler sees the individual as an integral part of a larger system — the family, community and humanity. Thus every individual has the innate ability to engage in cooperative reciprocal social relations.

6. ***Individual subjectivity:*** Behaviour is always dependent on people's opinions of themselves and the environments with which they must cope - i.e. "schema of apperception". To Adler, people are motivated by fictional goals [9].

3. ADLER'S CENTRAL CONCEPTS AND VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE

Mallum [10,9] presented them through the following general headings:

1. ***The Structure of the Human Mind:*** Adler views the human mind as holistic one; an entity that is unified both unconsciously and consciously. For him, man is not made up of Id, ego, and superego as put forward by Sigmund Freud. The person and the situation are one. Soft determinism is the term given to this view as compared to Freud's hard determinism.
2. ***Inferiority Feelings and Compensation:*** To Adler [11], organ inferiority, i.e. congenitally weak functioning organs can lead to striking accomplishment in a person's life. It can also lead to inferiority complex if the individual's attempts to compensate are unsuccessful. To Adler, inferiority feelings are the motivational basis for essentially all human striving; one attains progress from his attempt to overcome inferiority feelings, be it imagined or real. Hence the feelings of inferiority not the defective organ motivate people. Thus, inferiority by itself cannot produce greatness; it must be combined with talent, courage and social concern.

4. THE ORIGIN OF INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Inferiority is a condition that begins from infancy and dealing with it appropriately is necessary if one is to grow, succeed and realize his potentials [12]. Adler describes three childhood situations that tend to lead to an inferiority complex: organ inferiority, spoiling or pampering, and neglect or rejection.

- i. ***Organ Inferiority*** - in childhood the physically impaired or chronically ill child is to compete successfully with other children and so he withdraws into a "shell of inferiority" [12].
- ii. ***Spoiled or pampered Children*** -grow up lacking confidence in their abilities

- because others have always done things for them. They are plagued with deep seated inferiority feelings.
- iii. **Neglected or rejected Children** - basically feel unwanted. They go through life lacking confidence in their ability to be useful and to gain affection and esteem from others. Each of these situations can play a crucial role in the emergence of neurosis in adulthood. A person may react to circumstances that give rise to inferiority feelings by exaggerating or overcompensating and thus develop what Adler called a superiority complex.
- i. **Inferiority Complex** - Individuals with this type of life-style are feeble in solving life's problems in ways that are socially useful.
- ii. **Oedipus Complex** - this lifestyle is lived by individuals who have been pampered while they were being brought up. These individuals have their mothers as the goals they will not let go.
- iii. **Proof Complex** - Individuals with this life style are afraid of making mistakes in anything they do in life. They tend to frighten others each time by always demanding for immediate proof of anything or issue raised.
- iv. **Redeemer Complex** - Individuals who live this lifestyle go through life struggling to redeem others for some imagined problems or obstacles.

- v. **Predestination Complex** - These individuals do not fear anything because their belief is that nothing can befall them. They also do not plan because they believe that all things are the same in the end.
- vi. **Leader Complex** - Individuals with this lifestyle hold on to their grounds and carve out their own niche in life because they look at themselves as pacesetters or leaders.
- vii. **Spectator Complex** - These individuals desire to be close to life's actions but not to take part or lead in anything that concerns them.
- viii. **"No" complex** - These individuals are conservative and fearful. This makes them to be against all change. They contradict or counter whatever issues are raised before them.

4.1 Striving for Superiority

Adler believed that the great dynamic force governing human behavior is "aggression" i.e. a strong initiative to overcome obstacles. He however changed his idea of an aggressive impulse in favor of the "will to power". In this concept, weakness is equated with femininity and power with masculinity. Adler came to the conclusion that the striving for superiority is the fundamental fact of human life. To him, all people share this great upward drive from "minus to plus, from below to above, from incompleteness to perfection and from inability to capability", in facing the problems of life. Adler believed that this striving for superiority is innate to the organism. To Him, this process begins during the fifth year when the child develops a life goal that serves as a focus for his striving.

4.2 Style of Life (or Life-style)

Style of life refers to the unique pattern of traits, behavior and habits which when taken together, define the particular route we have charted for ourselves in order to reach our life goal; everything we do is shaped and directed by our unique life-style [9]. [12] said, for Adler, an individual's behaviors are affected extensively by this lifestyle or unified life plan he has programmed for himself. It is Adler's belief that lifestyle factor develops in a child between 3 to 5 years of age. The development of these life-style results in the child's giving meaning to experiences. The life-styles according to the Adlerian psychology is so important for the individual that it helps him to compensate or make-up for different inferiorities he may possess. Shertzer and Stone [13] noted that Adler put forward eight types of lifestyles, which include:-

5. PERSONALITY TYPE BASED ON LIFE-STYLE ATTITUDES

Adler's first three types of life-style attitudes - the ruling, the getting, and the avoiding - all lack social interest but differs in their degree of activity. The fourth, the socially useful type has both high social interest and a high degree of activity [14].

- a. **The Ruling Type:** They behave without concern for other's welfare. They possess a dominating attitude toward the outside world and confront the major life tasks in an aggressive, antisocial manner.
- b. **The Getting Type:** They relate to the outside world in a parasitic manner, learning on others to satisfy most of their

needs. Their main concern in life is to get as much as possible from others.

- c. **The Avoiding Type:** Fearing failure more than desiring success, their lives are marked by the socially useless behavior of running from the tasks of life.
- d. **The Socially Useful Type:** They are socially oriented and willing to cooperate with others to master the tasks of life, while simultaneously ministering to their own needs and those of others. They see the three major task of occupation, friendship and loves as social problems.

5.1 Social Interest

The tendency of man to associate with his fellow human being or “striving for a form of community which it must be thought of as everlasting” is what Adler called social interest. [2] further explained that Adlerian approach recognizes man as having an inherent quality of community or social interests such as friendship, love, tenderness, etc. and are the antidote for selfish strivings for superiority. That man is able to express empathy for others even though he feels inferior. To Adler, mankind is moving into a higher state and it is the responsibility of each individual to advance this goal by struggling for perfection.

5.2 Creative Self

This concept implies that each of us creates his own personality; we actively construct it out of our experiences and heredity. People are, in final analysis, responsible for their destinies. It is the creative self that gives the individual the capacity to select his actions and to direct which life he may take. While heredity gives man certain traits and abilities, the environment affords man the chance to use or improve on the traits and capacities that were inherited. The creative self, helps man to utilize his environmental factors to improve on the traits and capacities man inherited.

5.3 Order of Birth

Adler as observed by [15] was of the view that certain life-styles often develop as a function of a person's ordinal position within the family and that children do not have similar social environment even though they come from the same parents and family background. The child's perceptions of his situation and the meaning attached to such situation that accompany his occupied position determine the way his ordinal

position will influence his life-style. Adler was interested in four of such ordinal positions, which [9] identified as the first-born, the second-born, the youngest and the only child.

- a. **The first-born child:** As the first, the oldest and the only child, he enjoyed an enviable position for a while. At its arrival as the first and only child, the parents are thrilled and committed to meeting its needs. With the arrival of the second child, the firstborn feels like a king dethroned. This traumatic experience makes him to fight back to regain his lost glory within the family which never succeeds. Finally, the first-born tends to withdraw and feel isolated.
- b. **The Second-born child:** From the very beginning, the second child has a pacesetter in the older brother or sister and he or she is thus challenged to outdo the older child's exploits. He is often characterized by being highly competitive and ambitious.
- c. **The Youngest child:** The youngest child never experienced the shock of dethronement like the first-born. He is pampered by not only the parent but other siblings and is regarded as the baby in the family. He lacks the sense of independence as he is always carried along by older siblings. Adler also stated that such a child experiences strong feelings of inferiority. He thus posits that the lastborn possesses an advantage of being highly motivated to surpass older siblings.
- d. **The Only Child:** In Adler's view, the only child is in a unique position of not having other siblings to compete with him. The only child is particularly pampered by the mother. This Adler argued often leads an only child into an intense rivalry with the father. Such a child becomes “tied to the mother's apron strings”. He is always self-centred and dependent in his life style.

5.4 Fictional Finalism

Adler's fictional finalism concept is based upon the writings of philosopher Hans Vaihinger's book titled “The Philosophy of As - If”. In it, he argued that people create ideas, which guided their behavior. Adler adopted this view and came to the conclusion that all people's various strivings could not occur without the perception of goals. Goals give direction to all our behavior

and are necessary for individual advancement and development. By fictional goals, we refer to the image of what the individual can be in the future. However, Adler believed that goals are ideals and not something tangible. They can be healthy fictions or mistaken goals.

6. ADLER'S EXPLANATION FOR ABNORMAL BEHAVIORS

To Adler, abnormality is a result of developing heightened feelings of inferiority early in life [16]. In an attempt to deal with the overwhelming tension created by these feelings, the individual develops inappropriate patterns of behavior to overcompensate for the inferiority. He contended that the three main reasons an individual develops increased feelings of inferiority are:-

- i. Being born with a physical or mental defects
- ii. Being pampered by parents and
- iii. Being subjected to neglect.

In the case of the psychotic, Adlerian approach holds that he keeps to a world of fantasy, builds a belief system, which is delusional. The psychotic hallucinates in order to justify failure and get other people's sympathy.

7. GOALS OF THERAPY

Mallum [10] noted that the Adlerian approach has the following as its goal of therapy:

- i. Reducing the intensity of client's inferiority complexes or of such feelings.
- ii. Correcting the client's wrong habits of viewing their world.
- iii. To help client develop a new set of objectives toward which he can direct his behavior.
- iv. To redevelop the individual's inherent social interest with accompanying social interaction.
- v. Helps clients to examine their mistaken lifestyle, develop, and practice alternative life styles that are positive.
- vi. Help clients to develop affection for others and to increase their activities that will enable them to face life.
- vii. Help clients to face squarely their superiority strivings and eventually enable them to have consideration for and interest in other people.

8. THERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUES OF INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

During therapy, Adler preferred to have everyone sitting up and talking face to face and to avoid appearing too authoritarian [4]. Thus, the following techniques are advocated in Individual Psychology:

- a) **Interpretative Technique:** In this, the therapist interprets the hypotheses on the client's lifestyle to him. In fact, the Adlerian approach emphasizes the significance of helping a client to have insight into his or her conditions. If this situation is to be achieved, the therapist should be simple, direct and clear in explaining the client's lifestyle to him or her.
- b) **Comparative Technique:** This involves the use of empathy by the therapist and his imagining and communicating to the client the goal the therapist will pursue if he were to be in the client's position. The counselor or therapist also compares each information given by the client on his or her attitudes and physical problems that may contribute to the formation of a life style.
- c) **Close behavioral inspection technique:** To [12], this involves the therapist's close inspection of how the client presents himself from the very moment he comes in contact with the therapist.
- d) **Life history study technique:** In this, data from the client's life history are compared with current events in the life of the client.
- e) **Dream analysis technique:** The client's dreams are used to comb out his or her life style. The reason for using dream analysis is because goals are reflected by dreams and they are related to future desires.

9. APPLICABILITY OF ADLERIAN APPROACH TO NIGERIAN LIFE SITUATION

Adler's Individual Psychology is applicable to many Nigerian settings as discussed below:

1. An in-depth examination of Adler's approach will show that the summary of its goal of counseling is to help clients to correct their wrong styles of life, and strive for social interests rather than for superiority, which can also apply in Nigerian environment.
2. When what is happening in the Nigerian society today is recounted, one will say

- that the theory, its constructs and techniques are applicable to the Nigerian situation. Example, it is common to find individuals in the different Nigerian culture striving for superiority. Happenings in Nigeria reveals the fact that there are uneducated people who have inferiority complexes, but are strive for superiority by either acquiring or buying academic titles or amassing wealth in order to compensate for their lack of education.
3. There are also married couples who feel inferior because they are childless, or looking for a particular sex of children. They strive to compensate this inferiority complex by either stealing or buying or adopting children using short cuts procedures.
 4. There are also young individuals in Nigerian's educational systems who are unable to handle life's problems because of the wrong ideas they have about how life should be lived, or how life should treat them. These adolescents have taken solace in secret cultism and have become thorns in the society's flesh. In such case, the Adlerian approach of counseling no doubt will be useful, we think.
 5. Nigerian parents also have a lot to learn from this theory which highlights the consequences of either pampering or neglecting children. The ideas put forward by Adler on pampering and neglecting children will go a long way to help Nigerian parents to engage in parenting styles that are responsible.
 6. The Adlerian theory can be applied to people with mistaken life style. Many Nigerians have developed lifestyles that cannot create a just and egalitarian society, which is one of the objectives of the Nigerian constitution. These Nigerians behave in a way that can destroy the unity of the country; such as incessant communal and political crises in the country.
 7. This theory is useful to our society because we talk of self reliance in the policy of education. The individual should be encouraged to be self dependent using Adlerian approach. He should be counseled and equipped through education to understand himself and take up personal challenges of life. It is the creative self that gives the individual the capacity to select his actions and to direct which life he may take.
 8. Man is by nature a forward looking entity, a creature with a positive image about the nature and what the future may hold in stock for him. It is a common saying that, "the young shall grow". In fact, the fictional goal, which Nigerians have chosen, is to have a just and egalitarian society.
 9. In our daily activities, we see the Adlerian theory in action; all human behaviors depicts a sense of direction, i.e. a goal often pursued according to life pattern or style, individuals' feeling of inferiority propels them towards new attainments and achievements of new status of superiority.
 10. Adler's view of human nature pictures the order of birth in the family and the characteristics of each ordinal position of the children, tapping from this idea the counsellor, teacher, parents and significant others will understand better on how to handle or help a child for proper life adjustment.
- ## 10. CRITICISMS OF INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY
1. The Individual Psychology has been criticized for relying extensively on the use of intellectual insight to help clients change their maladaptive behaviors.
 2. It is also criticized for overemphasizing the determination for human behavior by roles played by subjective experiences, an individual interest, and values.
 3. Generally, it suffices to say that Adler's theory is comprehensive, although, like Freud's theory, its motivational base is limited.
 4. The concepts in Adler's theory are generally global in nature and poorly defined. Example, some individuals are thought to have "proof complexes". However, it is very difficult to measure the proof complex in people even if adequate measure is developed.
 5. The fact that there are only a few constructs in the theory means that they are going to be applied in highly general and imprecise ways.
 6. Apart from the recent strong support for man' of the ideas about birth order effects, much of his theory lies fallow and untested. However, current interest in measuring key concepts augurs well for eventual hypothesis testing. However, presently, empirical or scientific support for Adler's theory is not very strong.

11. MERITS

1. Adler's theory has heuristic value. In this area, it made great impact because of the number of subsequent investigations of human personality who claim to have been influenced by it. For example, some people consider Adler to be one of the founding fathers of the existential-humanistic movement in psychology, with its heavy emphasis on the individual's freedom to make choices in given situations and to deal creatively with his experiences. Adler's theory influenced directly or indirectly prominent psychologist like Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May and Victor Frankle. His theory made a considerable impact on the experimental work of Julian Rotter. The theory spurs one on how to discover things for oneself.
2. The theory also has applied value. This theory focuses upon phenomena that could reasonably be considered to be crucially involved in the development of people in a highly competitive and achievement-oriented society. The theory addresses itself to problems and issues that matter in a culture such as ours. This notwithstanding, the theory has made much impact outside its contributions in the areas of psychotherapy, education, and family life.

12. CONCLUSIONS

Adler's own childhood experience may be contributory to the development of Individual Psychology. His theory has a profound relationship to practical daily life experience in our contemporary society. Man's sense of helplessness at birth caused him to feel inferior; the desire to overcome his handicapped position propels him to strive for great heights. Man's individualistic nature continues to revolve around setting life goals and working towards realizing these goals. This theory has a great social, economic, political and educational relevance to our society. The role of the counselor then is to intervene using appropriate counseling techniques to redress negative thinking of the client.

Furthermore, the approach is among those that hold the idea that man is forward looking and always works toward self-perfection. It also regards the therapeutic relationship as an avenue for effecting a change in a client's

maladaptive social interests. This approach also emphasizes the presence of the creative self in man, which should be developed through counseling. What these imply is that the therapist who is Adlerian inclined has work to do and must always have the good of the clients at heart and this will help in recognizing man's capacity for positive change.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, patient's written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This paper was co-authored by Dr Goodluck, Kingdom Umegbwe and Dr Justin Mgbechi Odinioha Gabriel. Both authors jointly developed the paper and are also united in the bid to have the paper published. Since the paper is just a review paper, no primary data was sought from any one. Also, authorities cited have been duly acknowledged in the reference. Therefore, the paper is ethically in order.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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