

Basic Assumptions

The basic assumptions of any theory create the foundation upon which the rest of the theory, conceptualization and interventions are based. We now have an opportunity to briefly review the basic assumptions of Adlerian psychology, or, as it is also known, Individual psychology.

First, we will begin with the concept of holism. Many theories conceptually break the person into various parts, such as the conscious vs the unconscious, the id, ego and superego or various self states. Adlerians take a different approach and utilize holism to understand the total person. It is also important to note that the name "Individual Psychology" does not refer to our notion of the word individual, but a translation from the German word *individuell*, which refers to indivisibility- we can't break the person into various parts.

Instead, Adlerians focus on what the person is doing rather than asking what various parts of the person are doing. For an Adlerian the function of a part of a person is only important as they are a part of the whole. This theoretical distinction of focusing on the person as a whole, integrated being inserts the element of responsibility. We reconcile the experience of ambivalence, uncertainty and even some symptoms as the result of conflicting goals rather than a conflict between various parts of the self. For example, I could have a goal to lose five pounds before summer, but when offered a tasty treat I may accept it because my desire to indulge in the treat may seem more prominent for me in the moment. I experienced conflict in the moment, the cognition of "I know I shouldn't" is an indication of the conflict. However, I ultimately made a choice and let one goal, or one set of values outweigh another goal or set of values. Adlerian therapists work to empower and encourage our clients so they can be more aware of the movement they make in their lives through the choices they make.

The next tenant is teleology, which addresses the purpose of conflict. Adlerians believe people think, feel, emotive and react for a reason. Alfred Adler stood out at the time he was developing his theory as other theorists at that time were primarily focused on explaining development of personality and pathology as being rooted in the individual's childhood. Adler acknowledged that our past plays a critical role in

creating the foundation of our lifestyle, or personality but he went on to explain current behavior is influenced by our past but is also influenced by our goals for the future.

Then there is phenomenology which refers to the philosophy which concentrates on the study of consciousness and direct experiences. In other words we believe people see things from their own unique perspectives. Therefore Adlerians are not as much concerned with the facts as they are with the individual's perceptions of the facts. Our goal is to see things the way our client sees things. Rather than focusing on a universal external truth, we are more interested on the unique ways people make meaning and seek to understand the personal philosophy of the individual and what truth is for that unique person. We can then appreciate how they use that philosophy in the larger world and what their subjective experiences mean to them.

Adlerian theory also focuses on soft-determinism. Rather than having a deterministic orientation which would be rooted in causality, Adlerians acknowledge there are true ceilings and floors to our capabilities and to the possibilities in life, but we also acknowledge the individual has the ability to choose how to respond or make use of the choices available to him or her. We can't do everything, but we can do more things than we often give our self credit for. Adler suggested we write the script of our lives, and asserted the notion of the creative self. Consider the metaphor of each person being dealt a hand of cards in life. Adlerians acknowledge you may not be able to control the hand you're dealt but you can control how you play your hand. Freedom of choice is central to Adlerians which is why we focus on empowerment and encouragement in our interventions with clients.

Adlerian theory is a field theory. Kurt Leubin came up with field theory, he said for every person there is a field in which he or she operates, and Adler adopted field theory and said you can only understand the person within the context. Every person is constantly reacting to and responding to his environment. We take in information about what is happening around us, we perceive it, and then we attach meaning to it and we respond. So for Adlerians we can explain some variation of behavior based on the context. Someone may behave very differently at a party on Saturday night when compared to how they behave at work on Monday morning. Adlerians would want to

explore what was happening in those environments and how the person made meaning of it.

Adlerians believe people are motivated by self-created goals. We believe people want to strive toward what they seek in life; from a felt minus toward a perceived plus. Many of our goals can be so engrained we may not be aware of everything we are striving towards.

Finally, Adlerians hold the concept of Gemeinschaftsgefühl to be central. While the concept of community feeling extends beyond our brief summary here I will provide a more thorough explanation in another video.

In a general sense maladjustment is characterized by increased inferiority feelings, underdeveloped social interest, and an exaggerated uncooperative goal of personal superiority. People may develop symptoms when they try to solve problems in a self-centered "private sense" rather than a task-centered "common sense."