

Individual Psychology (Adlerian) Applied to International Collectivist Cultures: Compatibility, Effectiveness, and Impact

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The following article explores the process of Adlerian Therapy and how this theory can be applied to international collectivist cultures. The authors offer an overview of the Individual Psychology perspective and its concepts and discuss the gap in the lack of understanding among counselors and other mental health professionals in the applicability of Adlerian techniques with collectivist clients. In addition, the authors highlight the importance of cultural understanding by mental health professionals by giving clear examples and connections to real life therapeutic situations.

Suggested reference:

Aslinia, S. D., Rasheed, M., & Simpson, C. (2011). Individual psychology (Adlerian) applied to international collectivist cultures: Compatibility, effectiveness, and impact. *Journal for International Counselor Education*, 3, 1-12. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.library.unlv.edu/jice>

Keywords: Individual Psychology • Adlerian • Collectivist Cultures • Minorities

Alfred Adler, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were jointly involved in the psychoanalytic movement during the beginning of the 20th century (Coan, 1987). Philosophical differences led Jung and Adler to separate from Freud and the psychoanalytic camp. This separation prompted the development of new theoretical approaches in the field of psychotherapy. From the beginning of his career, Adler was most concerned with the dynamics of perceived environmental influences and the social interactions of people (Coan, 1987). This theoretical viewpoint created the holistic view of a human psyche inseparable from the many external factors and tasks of life. This notion became a cornerstone of Adlerian psychology that posited that people are indivisible, social, and creative (Carlson & Slavik, 1997). Adlerians believe people to be indivisible, meaning one cannot fully understand a human being without first understanding the person

holistically, and whose thoughts, actions, and feelings have a purpose and give meaning to that individual's life choices. Fall, Holden, & Marquis (2004) defined traditional holism as the whole person, and state that by neglecting the whole person, we inhibited understanding and seeing the genuine essence that is present in the individual. They further indicated that Adler believed that social interactions should incorporate this holistic approach. This notion ties into the definition of collectivism which is 'part of a whole'. It then would be accurate to conclude that Adler supported the notion that holism (the whole person which includes social interactions) and collectivism share some similar ideas of the meaning of 'healthy'— or in Adlerian terms, the meaning of 'striving for superiority'.

To create this sense of understanding, a psychotherapist is charged with the task of examining a person's environment and social interactions among the many other factors that are assessed during a therapeutic relationship. Certain misconceptions about the applicability and effectiveness of Adlerian techniques to individuals from collectivist cultures exist. Many counselors argue that the Adlerian approach is concerned solely with finding the importance of meaning for the individual. The name that Adler gave his theory in English, *Individual Psychology*, has long been a source of misunderstanding in the therapeutic community. In fact, some experts consider this naming to be a mistake of Adler's. This is believed to have taken place due to the loss of meaning in translation. In German the name *individual* means indivisible, as its Latin roots indicates. Highlighting the notion that a person is an indivisible unit and needs to be understood as a total being and not individually and separate from other units (Carlson, 2009).

When evaluating the significance of cultural background on a current situation, it is imperative to possess an understanding of the individual's frame of reference. Some individuals, particularly those raised in Western culture, operate within an individualistic framework whereas many individuals from other societies (i.e. African, Asian, and Middle Eastern) operate from a collectivist frame of reference. In summary, individualistic cultures are defined as those that tend to be more concerned with the consequences of one's behaviors and thoughts as they relate to the person and not the society or the group as a whole. Collectivist cultures tend to be concerned with the consequences of a person's actions as they relate to the in-group members (Smith & Dugan, 1998). Castillo, Conoley, and Brossart (2004) provide the following example to highlight the differences between the two. They differentiate between the White American culture which values independence, autonomy, achievement, and competition (Katz, 1985) as compared to the Mexican American culture that values family unity, loyalty, sacrifice, and cooperation rather than competition (Paniagua, 1998; Sue & Sue, 1999). Once the counselor understands the client's cultural frame of reference, Adlerian concepts such as social interest may be explored. The

following elucidates how Adlerian psychotherapy can be easily incorporated into counseling individuals living in collectivist cultures.

Role of Cultural Understanding

To begin, it is important to visit the concept of cultural understanding before embarking on an interpersonal journey with the individual. Disregarding an individual's cultural background and belief system is similar to disregarding the childhood of an individual. From an Adlerian perspective, understanding a client's subjective and *unique* experience is essential. Attending to the uniqueness of the client means investigating the client's views, thoughts, and values, which might be different from the counselor or the dominant culture. It is only through such investigation that a counselor can begin guiding his or her client based on the client's needs and capabilities.

It is not uncommon for counselors to disregard the unique cultural qualities of the individual. Often this disregard takes place in settings where an individual from a minority culture engages in sessions with a counselor from a dominant culture. In this manuscript, the *dominant culture* will be defined as mainstream culture that practices norms accepted by the majority of the society. Minority clients will be defined as those individuals who are first generation immigrants who have migrated to a new country from their country of birth, second generation immigrants whose parents migrated to the new host nation but predominantly identify with their parents' cultural background, and any sub-cultures present within the dominant culture. In the case of the United States this would include African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and any other groups that have their own unique traditions and rituals that they continue to practice and strive to maintain.

The disregard for understanding the client's cultural background is sometimes connected to the counselors' level of discomfort or insecurity with multicultural issues. In fact, Hartl, Marino, Zeiss, Regey and Leontis (2007) found that supervisees (counselors-in-training) reported feeling hesitant and uneasy discussing issues related to multiculturalism with their supervisors. It would be difficult for counselors to conceptualize cases if he or she was unaware of the individual's cultural background and past experiences. It is the client's past experiences and cultural norms that complete the many facets of his or her personality and psyche.

Many counselors avoid asking questions about culture due to the concern that a lack of knowledge will diminish their creditability with the client and hinder progress. Ridley (1995) suggested that counselors often need to maintain a naïve stance in regard to multicultural issues in order to learn more specifics about the culture. Ridley also suggested that lack of knowledge about different cultures is often difficult for counselors to acknowledge due to a desire to be perceived as experts. Counselors must

accept the limitations of their expertise in order to make more reasonable interpretations of their clients' struggles (Ridley, 1995). Another reason for disregard of the client's cultural background is the belief that the client is obligated to assimilate or acculturate into the new culture. The term, *assimilation* refers to the process by which individuals no longer wish to maintain their past cultural identity and search for daily interaction with other cultures to modify their past cultural values and beliefs. *Acculturation* on the other hand, is defined as the shifts in attitudes, subjective norms, values, and behaviors that result from exposure to a new culture (Kosic, Kruglanski, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2004).

This mistaken belief in assimilation or acculturation might be applied with the best of intentions. Often a counselor may believe that supporting individualistic values in place of a collectivist values encourages 'healthy' change. Other counselors may believe that by focusing on cultural background, the client is not acknowledging the here-and-now. These common mistakes are inconsistent with the holistic philosophy that Adler proposed. Additionally, these mistakes can serve to undermine the philosophy that counseling is inherently dependant on the ability of the client to make changes to his or her subjective perceptions about his or her world.

A lack of willingness to better understand a client's culture and values can have potentially damaging implications worldwide. In an age when more human resources are being shared across the globe, deeper cultural understanding also is needed to connect individuals to one another in more meaningful ways. Many catastrophic events can be recalled in recent history. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 U.S. Katrina hurricane, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake have ushered the mobilization of mental health professionals across the planet to provide services to individuals in need. During these times it is essential to understand the cultural and sub-cultural connections of the individuals concerned. Adlerian concepts can promote such understanding.

Adlerian Concepts

Adlerian concepts of uncovering dynamics of the client and providing reorientation are relevant and applicable in collectivist cultures today. In order for the authors to offer a summary of the work of Alfred Adler, the following concepts are presented with their respective levels of effectiveness and impact in today's global society.

Adlerians believe that regardless of culture or background, a very basic yet dynamic force exists behind all human emotions, behaviors, and actions. This innate motive is the striving from a perceived 'minus' situation towards a 'plus' situation. This is referred to as *moving from feelings of inferiority toward feelings of superiority or competence*. Although it has been acknowledged that these goals and self-ideals are influenced by biological and environmental factors such as familial interactions, expectations, and

cultural norms, they are nevertheless ultimately the creation of the person, and as a result, indivisible from the rest of his or her being.

These goals are not always available in the individual's conscious mind and therefore, remain largely unknown and not understood (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967). However, a counselor who is fully aware of the client's perceptions and norms, may help the client gain new insights and conscious awareness about motives and desires.

The lack of understanding about these goals creates discouragement as the individual continues unhealthy behaviors and emotions, fully unaware that those emotions and behaviors are ultimately the driving force of goals and self-ideals which he or she is trying to achieve and conquer. In part, this is what Adler called the individual's *style of life*, which he believed becomes firmly established at an early age and that the person changes and adapts all of his actions to follow to reach the same destination.

For counselors, identifying individual goals becomes a key to understanding the individual as it offers them the working hypothesis they need to follow. It is at this point that all objective determinants, such as cultural norms, familial norms, biological factors, and the person's past history become relevant to the person's idea of goals. Although these external factors do not function as a direct cause of the goal, they certainly shape the person's perceptions about the processes in which they need to be engaged (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967). If the counselor is able to conceptualize these key determinants and the client's life goals, in addition to creating a non-threatening and collaborative relationship with a client from a collectivist culture, he or she can educate the client and through this process empower and encourage the client to reorient his or her style of life.

Adler explained the individual's opinion of him or herself, world around him or her, and his or her interpretations, as important aspects of the style of life, and mentioned that these three perceptions influence every psychological process within the individual (Adler, 1912; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967). Adler (1926) suggested that the individual could be considered apart from his social situation and that Individual Psychology regards and examines the individual as socially embedded. He stated, "we refuse to recognize and examine an isolated human being" (Adler, 1926, p. ix). This notion of recognizing the individual within his or her social environment is at the core of the use of Individual (Adlerian) Psychology for working with clients from collectivist cultures.

It is important to note, these conditions cannot be created if the ultimate goal of the counselor is to highlight the irrelevancy of the collectivist or connected life style that the client has chosen, and are seen as factors holding him back from making individual decisions. If this is the ultimate goal of the counselor, the client from a collectivist culture might feel pressured, manipulated, and judged and may not respond to the invitation of self-exploration.

Social Interest

According to Murphy (1928), Adler's theory and its connection to social interest was "the first psychological system in the history of psychology that was developed in what we should today call a social-science direction" (p. 341). Adlerians believe that after understanding the desire for overcoming inferiority and developing perfection, the social aspect of an individual's life is indeed the most important factor in Individual Psychology (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967). The concept of social interest relates closely to the importance that collectivist cultures place on social embeddedness and the state of safety and security that is developed by being a part of a larger entity.

It is through considering an individual's attitudes and views towards his or her fellows that one can begin to comprehend the full person. It is important to note that social interest is not a second dynamic force counterbalancing a striving for superiority. Rather, it is like any other psychological process within a person's psyche and in fact, it is one of the most important. It is through this social interest that the person is able to strive for superiority or perfection, which in itself is socially neutral; in a way, collectivist cultures also view this as striving towards goodness. Adler in one of his last papers referred to this notion as "the brick which we call 'inherited possibility of social interest'" meaning the raw material by which a person is able to strive for superiority and construct his or her style of life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967, p. 156).

Adlerians further believe that individuals who form tight groups tend to be more successful than individuals who choose to isolate (Fall, Holden, & Marquis, 2004). This very belief—to be among the whole rather than isolated—is encouraged and viewed as healthy in collectivist cultures. Kaplan (1991) discussed the importance of social interest and how it includes communality—"helping, sharing, participating, cooperating, and compromising"—all of which fit closely with the collectivist mentality that also values the ideas of contributing to the whole and views community as a vital part of life.

The Therapeutic Relationship and Change

Perhaps the greatest challenge of applying Adlerian concepts within a collectivist culture is in creating an environment where the client feels safe and not judged in exploring his or her own lifestyle. In many collectivist cultures the process of self-exploration is often perceived as a selfish endeavor. This perception often times leads individuals to subordinate their individual desires and focus on the desires of their family or group.

It has been the experience of the authors that those clients who are able to develop a collaborative and trusting relationship with their counselors and become willing to explore their individual desires in life often

go through a period where they feel high levels of guilt and betrayal. It is imperative that the counselor be fully aware of this phenomenon and through understanding and genuineness guide the client through the challenging period. It is through the consistent encouragement of the counselor that the client will finally begin to form a strong insight into his or her own behaviors, emotions, and actions.

The actual change in the psyche of the client can only be achieved by his own doing. Ansbacher wrote "I have found it most profitable to sit ostentatiously with my hands in my lap, fully convinced that no matter what I might be able to say on the point, the (client) can learn nothing from me that he, as the sufferer, does not understand better once he has recognized his life-line" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967, p. 336). It is imperative for the counselor to understand that just because a client comes from a collectivist culture does not mean he or she is incapable of reaching individual desires and goals, even though they may exhibit high levels of desire to serve their families and communities.

This is the mindset of many collectivist clients at the onset of their counseling process. Additionally it is just as important for the counselor to understand that by giving individuals the encouragement to explore and understand their own personal and individual desires does not mean that the client will have to abstain from all collectivist responsibilities, connections, and relationships. The most ideal outcome may be helping the client achieve a balanced lifestyle in which he or she continues to be a member of the collectivist group, through keeping an active social interest schema, and at the same time becoming able to prioritize situations where his or her personal and individualistic desires are more important to attend to.

A Personal Account

As the first author of this article, I am a counselor educator in training in the final stages of doctoral study in counselor education. I am also an Iranian-American. Early in my training, I sought a guiding theory of counseling that accounted for the cultural gaps that exist as a result of the mainly Westernized psychological theories. From my perspective, a majority of Western psychotherapeutic theories, such as Cognitive, Person-Centered, Gestalt and Solution-Focused emphasize only the individual's desires and needs. While these theories possess concepts and techniques that can promote significant individual change, they may not be compatible with clients from collectivist cultures.

Being Persian, I have a deep sense of understanding and appreciation for how collectivist cultures operate. This understanding has allowed me to build stronger and deeper rapport with my clients who struggle with creating a balance between their individual desires, their goals in life and those of their families and collectivist groups in which they are members. I

have also struggled with finding balance between encouraging clients to reframe their views within the context of an individual perspective, without asking them to break their connection to their collectivist families. Having heard their struggles with feelings of guilt and betrayal, I have come to realize that Adlerian concepts can facilitate a balanced approach with clients from collectivist cultures.

To elucidate this experience, I will share the process I created and modified while working with one of my collectivist clients. In order to respect my client's confidentiality I will refer to him as Ishmael. My working relationship with Ishmael who is 15 years old began with a phone call from his mother who desired for her son to see me. According to his mother, Ishmael had been in therapy for the past year but the family was not observing much progress.

The issues that Ishmael's mother reported that needed to be addressed were depression, self-loathing, low to non-existent levels of self-confidence, a negative outlook on life, and social anxiety. At our first meeting, Ishmael was accompanied with his mother and father, who both seemed very eager to reach results. Ishmael's parents were very quick to note and emphasize that Ishmael had been seeing a psychotherapist for the past year, and although the psychotherapist was empathic, sessions had not produced positive results for their son. Since Ishmael and his family were Middle-Eastern, I conceptualized that they most likely had a collectivist culture mindset, and as a result felt the first session was extremely important in developing strong rapport with both Ishmael and his parents. In general, building rapport and developing a strong relationship is always at the core of any counseling relationship. However, based on the background knowledge that I have about collectivist cultures, I knew I would need the help and cooperation of his parents along the way.

I have recognized that when working with collectivist clients, therapeutic work is typically more effective when the cooperation of the family and immediate surroundings exists. If the counselor's agenda is to feed positive messages to the client during the session, it should be expected that those messages could be easily undone by the client's family expectations with counter-responses such as "this is not tolerated by our culture" or "only certain parts of the counselor's theories fit our cultural expectations from you". With this baseline understanding, it becomes imperative to recruit the family and parents to ensure they are in agreement with how I would work with Ishmael according to the principles of the Adlerian theory.

This process served as several distinct and important pillars for the therapeutic relationship with Ishmael that I embarked upon. The first pillar is that I had in essence disarmed Ishmael's parents of feeling that I was attempting to undo their cultural teachings and collectivist mentality. Once they felt at ease with my intentions not to degrade their values and beliefs, they began to develop a sense of trust that I had the capacity to understand

their struggles. It was at this point that the client's father noted that Ishmael's previous therapist was "American" and perhaps she "did not understand our culture." This comment confirmed my approach and assured me that I was on the right path to continue to bring down the walls of distrust of the family. This highlights the Adlerian emphasis on understanding the complete individual within his or her environment and group and not as a disconnected link.

The second pillar was the process in which Ishmael directly observed his parents approval of my therapeutic approach, goals, and of our counselor and client relationship. For many collectivist clients, this is an imperative step that can finally allow them to move beyond filtering some of the content in the counseling session to fit what they believe would be acceptable by their parents or collectivist group. By moving them past this censorship phase, they can finally begin to process ideas and goals through their own subjective world and not that of a collectivist culture. The second pillar directly links to the Adlerian approach of assessing the client's style of life, which cannot be completed if the client is not willing to explore his or her goals and desires.

The third pillar that was created by this collaborative and respectful exchange was the modeling of how the rest of the sessions would progress. I was able to present both Ishmael and his parents with an approach that would be marked by cooperation, a non-judgmental stance, and richness in encouragement and support, all of which are important in Adlerian therapy.

Once I had the parents' blessing and approval, I was able to interject some of my visions for how the process would be best served. For example, I informed Ishmael's parents regarding their absolute legal right to at any point request to see my notes or ask for status updates. However, I requested that they allow Ishmael to independently make the choice to tell his parents what had taken place during the sessions instead of being forced to share the conversations. I further supported my request by explaining that allowing their son to choose to share with them would break down the walls of limitation during the sessions and Ishmael likely would share his problems and issues in a more trusting way. They accepted this proposal and my work with Ishmael began.

Through the many weeks I worked with Ishmael, I noticed a sense of growth some weeks and a sense of disappointment and discouragement during other weeks. Almost always, the sense of discouragement stemmed from Ishmael's desire to communicate his wishes and life goals to his parents, but those desires were rejected and silenced because his goals did not fit the family's wishes. For example, to Ishmael's discontent, his parents wished their son would pursue a career in the medical field. Thus, Ishmael developed a great fear and lack of desire in wanting to pursue a medical degree. His parents were adamant that Ishmael had no clue about what he wanted for his future and that he had to become a medical doctor to guarantee a good life for himself and at the same time bring honor to his

family. What the family did not care about was my attempts to show that he is an individual and capable of making his own personal decisions, with the guidance—not force—of his parents. It is at a cross-road such as this one that a counselor begins to appreciate the strength of a collectivist mindset. Realizing this phenomenon, I knew that if I resisted the parents' beliefs and values, I would lose their trust, and as a result, lose my ability to help Ishmael. This would certainly not be in his benefit as he had much work to be done. Instead of resisting the parents, I empathized with them. I validated their desires and simply requested that they not bring up the medical school goals for the time being. I justified my logic with Ishmael's current age and that he would have plenty of time to work with them in getting into medical school later, and that other priorities needed to be met at this point. This notion further created issues with the parents who felt that even though Ishmael was only 15, it was time for the career decision to be made and for him to start taking appropriate classes. This required me to have a session with his parents to further ease their fears about Ishmael's future and his progress.

Through many more weeks of work, Ishmael began to identify areas where he could experience and express his own desires and goals and at the same time keep his connection to his parents and be able to maintain some of their desires and goals as well. I still continue to work with Ishmael and have come to immensely respect the power of cooperation and collaboration in working with a collectivist client. It has been through finding pieces of social interest that I have been able to keep Ishmael's parents calm and anxiety-free long enough for him to begin grasping his personal subjective desires in life.

Conclusion

Adlerian theory through its collaborative nature begins the process of counseling with a non-threatening systematic exploration of the person's hidden goals and self-ideals without creating feelings of selfishness. This is in contrast with some of the more direct theories such as Solution-Focused, where a client is asked to present the issue at hand, and is then directly asked how that behavior or thought has benefited them and what they would be willing to do to change it. With the Adlerian approach, the client feels free to share the issues and is asked to explore meaning of actions and behaviors through encouragement rather than questioning.

It is important to reiterate for most collectivist clients that such exploration is often a new experience. It may be the first time the individual has begun to think in terms of personal wants and desires in life and this often creates feelings of vulnerability. With the Adlerian approach the counselor is able to be much more fluid and flexible and through this elasticity he or she is able to gauge the needs of the client and can adjust his or her questions based on those needs.

The social interest component of Individual Psychology is the critical piece that can serve as the bridge for collectivist clients to be able to cross over between the collectivist mentality and the world of individual psyche. It is this piece that makes the Adlerian theory a powerful approach in creating a balance for individuals who struggle with determining when it is permissible to allow their own desires to reign over the desires of other individuals in their families and groups. Once the client feels validated for his thoughts and behaviors, he or she develops a rapport with the counselor and realizes that the counseling process is simply a re-framing of priorities and not the dismissal of learned familial patterns and collectivist ideologies. At this point the client begins his or her self exploration and embraces the development of a strong insight into his or her own psyche.

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