

# A Visual Encapsulation of Adlerian Theory: A Tool for Teaching and Learning

CYNTHIA J. OSBORN



*A visual diagram is presented in this article to illustrate 6 key concepts of Adlerian theory discussed in corresponding narrative format. It is proposed that in an age of multimedia learning, a pictorial reference can enhance the teaching and learning of Adlerian theory, representing a commitment to humanistic education.*



Alfred Adler was a visionary. He envisioned human nature in concepts and images never before expressed by either his contemporaries or his predecessors. The positive and salutary perspective that he introduced was a refreshing alternative to the myopic, problem-oriented view held by disciples of classical psychoanalysis. Adler's theory has been described as "the forerunner of many other approaches to education, counseling, and therapy" (Sweeney, 1998, p. 38) and continues to be a captivating and an illuminating formulation of human behavior and potential, relevant in the new millennium (Watts, 2000).

The visual encapsulation described in this article is intended to assist both teachers and learners of Adlerian theory and counseling to acquire and promote a holistic understanding of the foundational concepts. In addition, a visual illustration of Adlerian theoretical concepts seems consistent with Adler's own visual orientation and visionary endeavors.

## MULTIMEDIA INSTRUCTION AS HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

In an era of visual displays and interactive communication, multimedia instruction is now commonplace, if not a necessity (Mayer, 1997). The variety of teaching tools now available provide educators with the opportunity to customize instructional processes to the learning preferences of their students (Plass, Chun, Mayer, & Leutner, 1998) and to the particular goals of the course (Seaman, 1998). Such matching of teaching and learning styles

---

*Cynthia J. Osborn is an assistant professor in the Counseling and Human Development Services Program in the College of Education at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Cynthia J. Osborn, 310 White Hall, College of Education, Kent State University, Kent OH 44242 (e-mail: cosborn@kent.edu).*

is a form of humanistic education, that is, instruction adapting to student orientation rather than having students comply with a one-size-fits-all instructional model (Richards & Combs, 1992).

The use of pictorial presentations represents a commitment to the principles of humanistic education. Furthermore, research from a variety of disciplines suggests that visual displays enhance the acquisition, integration, and retention of new material (Mayer, 1997; Paivio, 1986; Plass et al., 1998; Riding & Douglas, 1993). Counseling students may, therefore, find the visual encapsulation of Adlerian theory helpful in their process of integrating, retaining, and applying various terms and concepts.

## ILLUSTRATED PRINCIPLES OF ADLERIAN THEORY

The following sections are intended to represent the key principles of Adlerian theory. Each section corresponds to the images depicted in the accompanying Adlerian pictorial (see Figure 1). Neither the verbal (i.e., written text) nor the visual presentations are intended to capture in entirety the key components of Adlerian theory. They represent an introduction to the distinctive attributes of this model.

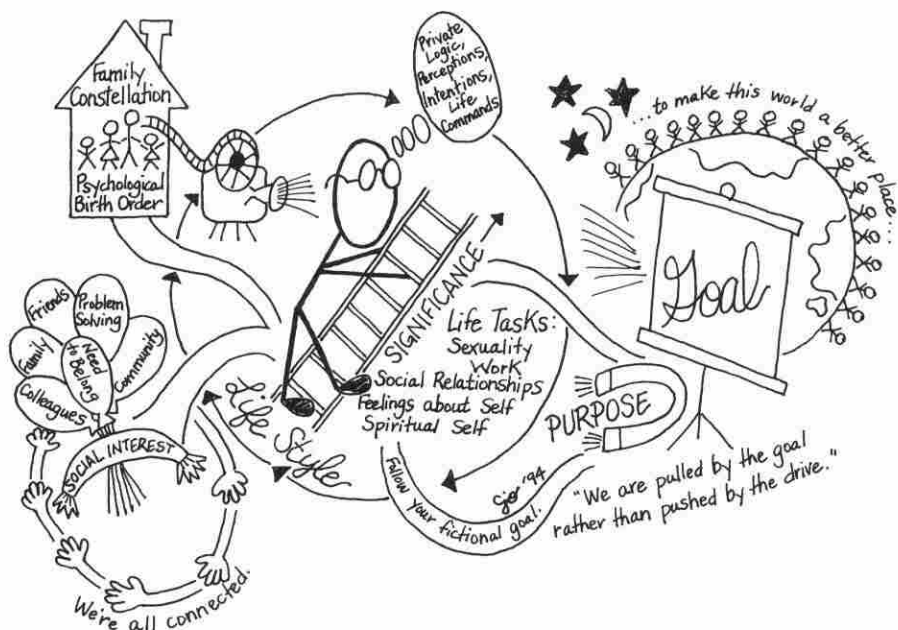


FIGURE 1

### A Visual Encapsulation of Adlerian Theory

## *Holistic and Humanistic Perspective*

The first image to notice in the drawing is that of the individual, who has been placed deliberately at the center of the pictorial. According to Adler, the individual is a whole entity, a composite being, not a collection of parts thrown together and reduced to such names as "ego," "superego," and "id." Each human being, therefore, is to be viewed in his or her entirety as a uniquely configured person who thinks, feels, and behaves as a unified whole. The arrows in the picture drawn in a circular fashion around the individual are intended to emphasize the holistic concept that each individual is a unified, indivisible being.

Adler's use of the term *individual psychology* reflected his belief in the unity, indivisibility or irreducibility, and self-consistency of each human being (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967). The term first appeared in written form in 1913 and was used to emphasize Adler's belief that "psychological processes and their manifestations can be understood only from the individual context and that all psychological insight begins with the individual" (Hoffman, 1994, p. 87).

This holistic view is represented in Adler's concept of lifestyle, which is understood as encompassing the basic notions that guide one through life (Sweeney, 1998), one's basic orientation toward life (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987), or "the totality of the individual's functioning" (Ansbacher, 1990, p. 45). Prochaska and Norcross (1999) specifically defined lifestyle as "a cognitive construction [and] an ideal representation of what a person is in the process of becoming" (p. 73).

An important aspect of lifestyle involves problem solving, particularly with respect to how one manages or overcomes difficulties within his or her social system (Ansbacher, 1990). The groups of life problems or life tasks (which are listed in the pictorial) are work, sexuality, social relationships, feelings about self, and spiritual self. From an Adlerian perspective, these represent areas of complexity and challenge and reflect the unique ways chosen to overcome problems as well as exemplify and complete aspirations.

### *Perception Determines Behavior*

The human figure in the drawing is wearing glasses (see Figure 1). This is intended to illustrate the significance that Adler placed on vision or *perception* as the driving force of behavior. In fact, Adler himself wore spectacles, as noted in a photograph of him soon after he was married at the age of 27 in 1897 (Hoffman, 1994). In addition, he selected ophthalmology as his initial professional specialty, an interesting career choice for a man who would later exhibit what Watts (1999) referred to as "remarkable vision" (p. 1) of human potential.

His emphasis on perception, however, was not limited to the sense of sight. It represented a more expansive concept, encompassing the process of interpretation, that is, the manner with which we make sense of things

(Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1989). This is apparent in the human figure's illustrated thoughts, which include private logic and life commands. These are primarily cognitive processes that represent our selective perceptions (Sweeney, 1998) and that influence, if not determine, human behavior (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1989; Dinkmeyer et al., 1987).

### *Teleological Perspective*

A concept closely related to that of perception in Adlerian thought is *teleology* or forward thinking and moving. The human figure in the drawing has been portrayed as looking ahead and deliberately preparing to face his or her future.

Adler was not especially concerned, as were his contemporaries, about etiology or causation. Rather, in all his work, he was captivated by, and maintained, a future orientation. He found empowerment and encouragement in the future, not the past, and thus focused his sights in that direction. "The most important question" he is credited with speculating, "is not whence? But whither? . . . In this whither? the cause is contained" (Adler, 1956, cited in Ansbacher, 1992, p. 11).

Human behavior, he reasoned, is characterized by its being pulled forward by constructed goals, not pushed from behind by predetermined explanations or instinctual drives (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987). Adlerians, therefore, "always see behavior in terms of its goal" (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1989, p. 28). The future thus serves as a magnet (as illustrated in the drawing), pulling us toward goals, dreams, aspirations, and intentions. These goals, Adler believed, comprise and are fashioned by our perceptions; our lifestyle; and our fictions, or nonrational and unconscious beliefs regarding life in general (Sweeney, 1998).

Such forward or teleological movement is a distinctive aspect of human nature, Adler believed, a type of movement characterized as striving for significance or superiority, a striving that encompasses perfection and completion (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). This is illustrated in the human figure's act of climbing a ladder in the drawing.

Adler exemplified such striving for significance as he struggled to overcome difficulties throughout his own life. These challenges included a diagnosis of rickets when he was 3 or 4 years old, waking up in bed when he was 4 years old to find his 1-year-old brother dead from diphtheria, contracting a severe case of pneumonia at age 5, vying with his older brother for the attention of their parents, and having a small stature (Hoffman, 1994).

He compensated for such inferiorities by activating what he referred to as his fictional goal, that is, the expectation of how one's future life can be completed (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999). He believed that striving for significance entails adhering to and following this expectation, which for him represented a strengthening of social interest or an improvement in one's social context (i.e., making this world a better place). This is illustrated as a populated globe in the upper right-hand corner of the drawing. Adler's

numerous accomplishments and his legacy today are testaments to the optimistic and salutary elements of his embodied philosophy.

### *Purposive or Functional Behavior*

The teleological nature of Adler's theory implies that human behavior is purposive or functional. What we choose to do serves a purpose, a very practical purpose. In other words, we select or determine our behavior according to its usefulness (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987), and this practical purpose serves as a magnet (again, as depicted in the drawing) pulling us toward our goals.

Human beings are inherently decisive, Adler believed, and are born with the capacity to make decisions regarding their present and future life. The roads or paths in the drawing illustrate this human ability and opportunity. The depicted figure is able to determine which route to take and which signposts to follow toward his or her fictional goal.

### *Family Constellation*

The Adlerian concept of family constellation is illustrated in the drawing in the upper left-hand corner. Perceptions of experiences in their family of origin remain with individuals throughout their lives and influence the decisions and choices they make. This ever-present influence is portrayed as the movie camera, projecting early recollected scripts onto the individual in the drawing, shaping both the thoughts and the reasoning of that person.

Adler believed that one's psychological birth order, or the interpretation or meaning given to one's place in his or her family of origin (Sweeney, 1998), is an influential factor throughout one's life. Adler attributed his own relentless striving for significance to his being second to his brother Sigmund, 2 years older, who had been a child of many accomplishments in his formative years (Hoffman, 1994).

Individuals' perceived place or inclusion in their family, and how they choose to respond to such early shaping, influences the paths they take in life and how they determine to participate in and make sense of life events. This is depicted in the drawing by the movie camera projecting early recollections that influence perceptions and private logic onto a screen in the future. The screen serves to capture and illustrate the figure's fictional goal, that is, what he or she aspires to, which is influenced, not determined, by one's past.

### *Social Interest*

The final Adlerian principle discussed and portrayed here has been referred to as the cornerstone of mental health (Rareshide & Kern, 1991). The literal translation of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* is community feeling or social interest and refers to the potential for human beings to live in harmony with the systems into which they have been born (Ansbacher, 1992). Dinkmeyer et

al. (1987) further defined this as one's "willingness to cooperate with others for the common good" (p. 10) whereas Sweeney (1998) described social interest as "each person's striving to make a place for himself or herself and to feel belongingness" (p. 8).

Social interest is illustrated in the drawing by the encircling of human hands in the lower left-hand corner. The collection of balloons is intended to signify the celebratory nature of belonging to a human community and being able to contribute in a meaningful way to the lives of others. This depiction serves to capture Hoffman's (1994) understanding of social interest as solidarity with others and a need for cooperation.

## SUMMARY

Alfred Adler was a proactive thinker and visionary, ahead of his time in many respects (Sweeney, 1998), and "seized by the vision of promulgating his psychological system throughout the world" (Hoffman, 1994, p. 105). The concepts that he formulated and articulated were thus revolutionary, representing a bold alternative to the conventional Freudian philosophy.

Adler's early training in ophthalmology, his forward thinking and future orientation, and his emphasis on perception as the determinant of behavior all lend themselves to the use of a visual depiction to capture and illustrate his theoretical convictions. The drawing is intended to supplement verbal representations of Adlerian theory, particularly for those who teach and are learning the nuances of this counseling approach.

Researchers have established the utility and effectiveness of a coordinated presentation of explanatory words and pictures in the learning process (Mayer, 1997; Paivio, 1986; Plass et al., 1998; Riding & Douglas, 1993), particularly in novel or complex situations (Lowrie, 1996). For counseling students being introduced to the complexities of Adlerian theory, a visual encapsulation of its key components can assist in the acquisition, organization, and clarification of this theory's principles.

Students in introduction to counseling theories classes have responded appreciatively to this drawing when Adlerian theory is presented. When used in conjunction with class lectures and readings, the pictorial can enhance the understanding of this theory of human nature. Furthermore, customizing the instructional method to assist students with visual learning preferences reflects a commitment to the application of humanistic education principles and a concern for subjective experience and individualized instruction (Richards & Combs, 1992).

## REFERENCES

- Ansbacher, H. L. (1990). Alfred Adler, pioneer in prevention of mental disorders. *Journal of Primary Prevention, 11*, 37-68.
- Ansbacher, H. L. (1992). Alfred Adler, pioneer in prevention of mental disorders. *Individual Psychology, 48*, 3-34.

- Ansbacher, H. L., & Ansbacher, R. R. (Eds.). (1967). *The individual psychology of Alfred Adler*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row.
- Dinkmeyer, D., & Dinkmeyer, D., Jr. (1989). Adlerian psychology. *Psychology: A Journal of Human Behavior*, 26, 26–34.
- Dinkmeyer, D. C., Dinkmeyer, D. C., Jr., & Sperry, L. (1987). *Adlerian counseling and psychotherapy*. (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Hoffman, E. (1994). *The drive for self: Alfred Adler and the founding of individual psychology*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Lowrie, T. (1996). The use of visual imagery as a problem-solving tool: Classroom implementation. *Journal of Mental Imagery*, 20, 127–140.
- Mayer, R. E. (1997). Multimedia learning: Are we asking the right questions? *Educational Psychologist*, 32, 1–19.
- Paivio, A. (1986). *Mental representations: A dual coding approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Plass, J. L., Chun, D. M., Mayer, R. E., & Leutner, D. (1998). Supporting visual and verbal learning preferences in a second-language multimedia learning environment. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90, 25–36.
- Prochaska, J. O., & Norcross, J. C. (1999). *Systems of psychotherapy: A transtheoretical analysis* (4th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Rareshide, M., & Kern, R. (1991). Social interest: The haves and the have nots. *Individual Psychology*, 47, 464–476.
- Richards, A. C., & Combs, A. W. (1992). Education and the humanistic challenge. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 20, 372–388.
- Riding, R., & Douglas, G. (1993). The effect of cognitive style and mode of presentation on learning and performance. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 63, 297–307.
- Seaman, M. A. (1998). Developing visual displays for lecture-based courses. *Teaching of Psychology*, 25, 141–145.
- Sweeney, T. J. (1998). *Adlerian counseling: A practitioner's approach* (4th ed.). Philadelphia: Accelerated Development/Taylor & Francis.
- Watts, R. E. (1999). The vision of Adler: An introduction. In R. E. Watts & J. Carlson (Eds.), *Interventions and strategies in counseling and psychotherapy* (pp. 1–13). Philadelphia: Accelerated Development/Taylor & Francis.
- Watts, R. E. (2000). Entering the new millennium: Is individual psychology still relevant? *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 56, 21–30.

*I've never learned anything while I was talking.*

—Larry King, TV talk show host

