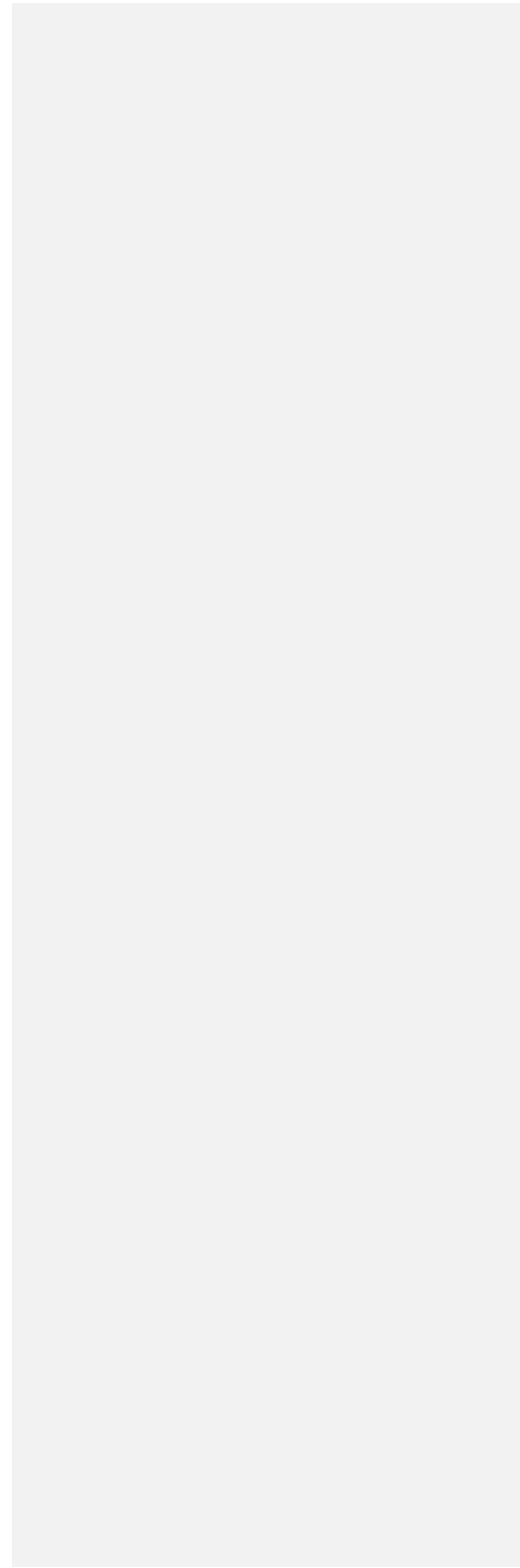


Navigating Adventure Therapy: Using Adlerian Theory as a Guide

David D. Christian, Danny L. McCarty, and Cian L. Brown



Abstract

This paper proposes the use of Adlerian theory to guide Adventure Therapy (AT), an active intervention that uses experiential techniques to foster client growth. Important Adlerian concepts identified in this paper include phenomenology, teleology, choice, superiority, social interest, and lifestyle with further discussion into Adlerian theory as a guiding theory of counseling. Also explored in this paper is the use of Adlerian theory to conceptualize AT participants and facilitate activities. Specific AT techniques like challenge-by-choice, full-value contract, adventure wave, risk, and adventure activities are identified. Finally, this article concludes by exploring how Adlerian theory can guide culturally responsive AT practice.

Keywords: Adlerian theory, adventure therapy, risk, play, experiential learning cycle

Navigating Adventure Therapy: Using Adlerian Theory as a Guide

Therapists can draw from a variety of available theories to guide their practice. While some encourage the adaptation of an eclectic or integrated approach, attempting to combine multiple theories can diminish congruence (Fall et al., 2017), a fundamental force for counseling success (Mosak, 1967). To remedy this conundrum, many therapists elect to be theoretically pure, but technically eclectic (Lazarus & Beutler, 1993). Technically eclectic therapists use theory to apply transtheoretical interventions, or those borrowed from another theoretical orientation, in a consistent and intentional way (Fall et al., 2017). One such transtheoretical intervention is Adventure Therapy (AT). As the “dominant voice in the push to develop best practices in AT” (Gass et al., 2020, p. 56), the Therapeutic Adventure Professional Group (TAPG, n.d.) has identified the continued need to increase theoretical understanding to inform practice. While TAPG (n.d.) has identified five core theoretical perspectives underpinning AT, Adlerian theory is not specifically mentioned. Adlerian theory’s absence is likely due to TAPG’s concern with elevating one theory over another and the desire to ensure flexibility in the application of various theoretical perspectives. However, TAPG identifies the use of theory to guide AT as a best practice. Thus, the purpose of this article is to outline the integration of Adlerian theory with AT with the hope of increasing the use of AT by Adlerian therapists and increasing the use of Adlerian theory as a guide for those already practicing AT. A detailed description of each follows, along with an explanation of how therapists can use Adlerian theory to guide AT practice.

Adlerian Theory

Adlerian theory allows for therapy to be brief, time-limited, strength-based, and directive (Carlson et al., 2006). Drawing on beliefs in social embeddedness, holism, phenomenology,

teleology, and choice, Adlerian therapists encourage client growth and awareness through exploring concepts such as superiority, social interest, lifestyle, and play (Bettner, 2020; Griffith & Maybell, 2020; McCarty & Christian, 2019; Sweeney, 2019). The following sections explain these beliefs and concepts.

Key Adlerian Beliefs

Social Embeddedness

As social beings, Adler (1927/1954) stated that the only way to understand humans is to consider them within a relational context. Adler supported this belief by pointing to humans' inability to survive alone, use of language, and sense of morality. Continuing throughout life, the need for cooperation begins at birth with babies being completely dependent on others for survival (Adler, 1927/1954; Dreikurs, 1991).

Regarding language, Adler (1927/1954) wrote that "speech would be absolutely unnecessary to an individual organism living alone" (p. 37). To support the claim that language is tied to community, Adler indicated that people who lack human contact struggle to develop language. Thus, community alone explains language (Adler, 1927/1954).

The notions of bad or good, right or wrong, and normal or abnormal are all concepts directly related to social embeddedness (Adler, 1927/1954; Manaster & Corsini, 1982). Behavior is evaluated based on societal norms and needs, and society therefore accepts or rejects individuals based on their contributions to the community (Carlson et al., 2006). The person's goal in choosing a behavior determines the behavior's moral worth. If the person's goal is to better humanity, then the behavior is acceptable (Adler, 1938).

Holism

Another key belief is that “we must have a complete whole in view before we can draw any conclusions about its parts” (Adler, 1927/1954, p. 20). People unify all their thoughts, feelings, and actions to create a lifestyle (Adler, 1935). Adlerian therapists therefore pay attention to the whole person by exploring the lifestyle. Sweeney and Witmer (1991) expounded on holism, positing that to be holistic, Adlerian therapists must integrate wellness—a person’s combined physical, emotional, and spiritual health—into the counseling process. More recently, Reese and Myers (2012) identified the natural environment’s impact on wellbeing and subsequently added ecowellness as a missing factor in holistic wellness models. Adlerian theory compels therapists to focus on all areas of health.

Teleology and Phenomenology

Also important to Adlerian theory are the concepts of teleology and phenomenology. Adlerian therapists believe all behavior is teleological or goal-directed (Adler, 1927/1954). People use their lifestyle to attain a variety of goals in life (Carlson et al., 2006). This concept of teleology is vital to the therapeutic process in that behaviors often cease when clients discover the goals for their behaviors (Adler, 1927/1954; Carlson et al., 2006; Dinkmeyer et al., 1987; Manaster & Corsini, 1982). Regarding phenomenology, by focusing on perception of events, Adlerian therapists help clients set goals, choose behavior, and ultimately recreate the lifestyle (Adler, 1927/1954; Dreikurs, 1991). McCarty and Christian (2019) pointed out that “people use their unique perspectives to creatively navigate the world, and as they do so, they create and solidify their lifestyle” (p. 12).

Choice

Adlerian therapists reject the notion that environment, biology, or any combination of the two determines a person’s character. Consistent with his phenomenological viewpoint, Adler

(1935) believed people use biology and their perceptions of the environment to create a lifestyle. Thus, Adlerian therapists focus on freedom of choice, personal action, and creative ability (Manaster & Corsini, 1982).

Consequences, both natural and logical (Sweeney, 2019), are connected to choice. Logical consequences are logically connected to the behavior but require human intervention. Conversely, natural consequences follow from the behavior and do not require human intervention. In turn, consequences affect how people use their power of choice.

Key Adlerian Concepts

The following section contains key Adlerian concepts. Each concept presented is rooted in the aforementioned beliefs. An intentional overlap between the two sections demonstrates the consistency important to any theory.

Superiority and social interest

From Adler's (1979) perspective, the ultimate goal in life is to overcome inferiority and achieve a sense of superiority by successfully adapting to life's demands. Adler believed that people choose to adapt in one of two ways: in a way that benefits both themselves and society, or in a selfish way that uses or abuses others. As aforementioned, humans live in community to ensure survival (Adler, 1927/1954). In order to establish and maintain community, a certain system of expectations or agreements must be in place. These expectations and agreements include cooperation and contribution (Adler, 1927/1954). People operating out of social interest strive for superiority in a cooperative way that contributes to the betterment of society. The opposite are selfish individuals (Manaster & Corsini, 1982) who do not cooperate or contribute in a way that improves society. Indeed, cooperation is the observable evidence of social interest (Adler, 1938).

Even though all people are born with the potential for social interest (Adler, 1935), Adler (1935, 1957) and Dreikurs (1991) agreed that potential does not guarantee development. Society must foster social interest if children are to become adults who strive for superiority in a socially interested manner. Further, Dreikurs (1991) stated that, "People can develop their capacity for cooperation only if ... they are not fundamentally different from other people" (p. 9). Therefore, a feeling of belonging and acceptance is vital to the development of social interest. Though a sense of belonging is necessary for social interest, people also need courage to behave with social interest (Adler, 1929). Because discouragement precludes social interest, Adlerian therapists seek to encourage clients.

Lifestyle and the tasks of life

Adlerian therapists believe that lifestyle is established during childhood using perceptions of the environment and biology, as well as beliefs about success (Adler, 1935, 1957). These perceptions are known as private logic (Carlson et al., 2006). Lifestyle is the unified set of beliefs, characteristics, and behaviors (Adler, 1988) used to set goals and meet life's demands (Adler, 1935), referred to by Adlerian therapists as life tasks. The first three tasks are work, love, and friendship. Work is what people do for an occupation as well as any activity done to help society (Sweeney & Witmer, 1991). Love pertains to romantic relations between two people and is viewed as the most difficult task because it requires the highest level of physical and emotional intimacy (Carlson et al., 2006). Friendship is the platonic attraction and connection between humans that fosters cooperation (Carlson et al., 2006). Adlerian theorists identified the final two tasks of self and spirituality after Adler's death (Mosak & Pietro, 2006). The life task of self refers to a person's ability to know one's self and manage perceptions of self, others, and the world (Sweeney & Witmer, 1991). Sweeney and Witmer (1991) described spirituality as the

“creative energy source for purposiveness in life” (p. 530) that provides a lens used to interpret events in life. How people choose to approach each life task has more to do with social interest and lifestyle than ability (Dreikurs, 1991).

Play

A final concept important to explore for the purpose of this article is Adlerian theory’s conceptualization of play. Adler (1927/1954) believed that participating in play prepared children for the future demands of community living. Through play, children learn to collaborate, cooperate, contribute, and share as well as explore different roles.

Adler (1927/1954) also used play as an assessment technique. He believed that observing how children approach play provides insight into the developing lifestyle and level of social interest. In addition, Kottman (1999) encouraged using play to identify mistaken beliefs and goals of behavior. Therapists can also use creative play to alter the participants’ lifestyle (McCarty & Christian, 2019). Adler (1927/1954) felt so strongly about play that he stated, “Play is indivisibly connected with the soul. ... Play should never be considered as a method of killing time. ... It is not an insignificant matter to disturb a child in his [*sic*] play” (p. 82).

The Therapeutic Process

The following section contains a brief description of how the above concepts fit together during the four-stage therapeutic process of relationship, psychological investigation, interpretation, and reorientation (Sweeney, 2019). Adlerian therapists strive to become acquainted with the person before exploring problems (Carlson et al., 2006). During the relationship building stage, therapists focus on building trust and cooperation (Manaster & Corsini, 1982). Clients are viewed as discouraged, not as sick and in need of healing. In an

egalitarian therapeutic environment, therapists confront clients' mistaken beliefs contributing to feelings of inferiority and foster courage (Adler, 1927/1954).

The second stage, psychological investigation, varies depending on the presenting problem (Sweeney, 2019). Therapists will conduct a lifestyle assessment, exploring family of origin, early recollections, and the relationship between the client's private logic, mistaken beliefs, and goals. Because Adlerian therapists believe feelings are a result of beliefs (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987), identifying mistaken beliefs is pivotal.

After investigating the client's lifestyle, the client and therapist begin to search for meaning (Sweeney, 2019). The therapist will explore hypotheses about client behavior using information from the previous stage. As previously mentioned, Adlerian therapists believe behavior is goal directed. Thus, understanding goals of behavior is necessary for change.

In the final stage, reorientation, clients institute changes based on insights gained during the previous stages (Sweeney, 2019). Adlerian therapists use the therapeutic process to help clients gain courage to make desired changes. Adlerian therapists trust that "encouragement is the prime factor in stimulating change" (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987, p. 70). Therefore, as clients feel encouraged, feelings of inferiority decrease and social interest increases (Adler, 1927/1954).

To summarize, the goal of Adlerian therapy is to help clients understand how they use their lifestyle to strive for superiority (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987). To facilitate this knowledge, therapists explore private logic, mistaken beliefs, family of origin, early recollections, and life goals. As clients gain insight, the therapist encourages them to make the desired changes in order to contribute to society in a socially interested manner.

Adventure Therapy

Adventure therapy (AT) is a mode of counseling that intentionally uses adventure activities to facilitate social-emotional growth as well as behavior change in participants (Christian et al., 2019). AT is transtheoretical, but often becomes atheoretical when used by some facilitators. Fall et al. (2017) warns against using techniques without theory, a practice that can lead to ineffective interventions. Although previous literature has shown that AT is a mode of therapy consistent with Adlerian theory (Ashby et al., 2020; Christian et al., 2017; Glass & Myers, 2001; Wagner & Elliott, 2014), in this article we explicate how Adlerian theory can guide and ground one's use of AT. Table 1 provides details on the alignment of Adlerian and AT concepts as well as suggestions for using Adlerian theory to guide AT practice.

Challenge by Choice and the Full Value Contract

Challenge by choice empowers participants by allowing them to choose their level of participation and practice healthy decision making (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Multiple Adlerian concepts, including goal setting and the importance of personal perspectives, support challenge by choice. Also, by adhering to challenge by choice, therapists do not assume a position of authority, but instead create an egalitarian relationship that emphasizes freedom to choose.

The full value contract consists of six norms for group behavior: be here, be safe, be honest, set goals, care for self and others, and let go and move on (Project Adventure, 2007). The first value, be here, means participants are both physically and emotionally present during counseling. Being safe means participants seek to promote the physical and emotional safety of others. Being honest requires members to give honest feedback regarding the activity as well as interpersonal experiences. Setting goals means members will set personal and group goals during each activity. By caring for self and others, each participant adheres to challenge by choice and acts in ways that promote the health and wellbeing of all participants. Finally, letting go and

moving on means participants choose to let go of grudges, failed attempts, and/or previous mistaken beliefs. The group adds additional values as necessary (Schoel & Maizell, 2002).

The Adlerian concept of social interest grounds the full value contract and provides guidance to therapists who use that technique. The values of the contract promote a sense of belonging, emotional safety, cooperation, and egalitarian relationships (Glass & Myers, 2001). Also, by setting goals, participants gain insight into their goals and lifestyle. Clarifying goals is important because as Adler (1927/1954) stated, “few people know exactly what their goal is” (p. 30). Finally, helping participants learn to let go and move on can decrease feelings of inferiority while increasing courage and social interest.

Adventure Wave and the Experiential Learning Cycle

One concept pivotal to the implementation of AT is the adventure wave (Project Adventure, 2007; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). The adventure wave includes three phases: briefing, playing, and debriefing. In the first phase, briefing, the therapist explains the activity and expresses expectations, while the participants set individual and group goals. During the second phase, playing, the group engages in the activity. In the final phase, debriefing, the group begins to transfer learning by processing the activity (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

Another key concept is the experiential learning cycle (Project Adventure, 2007; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Based on Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning, therapists facilitating AT use the experiential learning cycle to promote change through the processing of experiences (Christian et al., 2019; Project Adventure, 2007; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). The cycle consists of four steps: doing, reflection, generalization, and transfer.

The first step in the experiential learning cycle is the same as the second phase of the adventure wave, whereas the final steps guide debriefing. During reflection, also known as a

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recreational debrief (Folan, 2012), the group reflects on what happened. During the recreation debrief, therapists might ask participants to share their favorite and least favorite part of the activity or what was hard and easy about the activity. During the generalization step, the group engages in an education debrief (Folan, 2012) where they consider what they have learned about themselves, others, and the world. During the final step of transfer, participants engage in a transformational debrief (Folan, 2012) where they set goals for transferring their new knowledge and insights to action in real life.

The Adlerian beliefs of social embeddedness and phenomenology justify the use of the adventure wave and experiential learning cycle. The experience occurs within a social context and requires communication, cooperation, and social interest for the group to proceed through the adventure wave. From an Adlerian perspective, therapists encourage participants to share their perceptions of the experience in order to gain insights into their lifestyles and then put those insights into action during the transfer step.

Disequilibrium and Risk

An important goal of AT is to create a sense of disequilibrium in participants, (Christian, et al., 2019; Gass et al., 2020) which provides an opportunity for them to exhibit, confront, and change their behavior. Therapists create disequilibrium by introducing activities that require participants to take risks in a unique setting (Christian, et al., 2019; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gass, et al., 2020; Schoel & Maizell, 2002). In this state of disequilibrium, participants experience a heightened sense of anxiety that cannot be allayed using their normal coping strategies (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). A social microcosm emerges where participants' problematic behavior manifests and can be confronted in the here-and-now (Yalom, 1995). Participants are then challenged to change old behaviors because they are no longer useful.

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The risks involved in adventure activities can be real or perceived. Real risk, described as the actual threat of physical harm, should be mitigated as much as possible (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Perceived risk presents no physical harm to participants but could result in embarrassment or possibly failing to complete the activity. Therapists use both types of risk to challenge mistaken beliefs and encourage participants to practice new behaviors.

Therapists who facilitate AT guided by Adlerian theory use the experience of disequilibrium as a starting point to explore participants' private logic, mistaken beliefs, lifestyles, and goals of behavior. During debriefing, the therapist facilitates a discussion about how the participants' thoughts and feelings influence their behavior. Using risk and disequilibrium to investigate participants' lifestyles and enact desired changes is consistent with Adlerian theory. In fact, Adler (1957) wrote that "the creative powers of the child and of the adult come under new tensions until new solutions have been brought into being and useless ones have been removed" (p. 20).

AT facilitators can use Adlerian theory to ground and guide their use of risk and disequilibrium. Courage, according to Adler (1938), is necessary for therapeutic growth. Adler taught that increased social interest strengthens courage; this idea can guide the AT facilitator to use the sense of belongingness and cooperation formed in earlier activities to bolster the participant's courage to take risks.

Adventure Activities

The technique that differentiates AT from other forms of therapy is the use of adventure activities. Adventure activities are group-oriented tasks designed to act as a metaphor for real life experiences (Christian, et al., 2019; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gass et al., 2020; Schoel & Maizell, 2002) and allow participants to experience the natural consequences of their choices

(Christian et al., 2019; Hill, 2007). Concepts important to the successful implementation of adventure activities are sequencing, assessment, and skills.

It is important that activities are sequenced in a developmentally appropriate manner (Christian et al., 2019; Gass et al., 2020) that follows a logical, growth producing progression (Christian et al., 2019). To select appropriate activities, therapists must be familiar with participants' needs and therapeutic goals (Christian et al., 2019). Appropriately sequenced activities help facilitate participants' feelings of acceptance and belonging, which promote group cohesion (Christian et al., 2019; Glass, 2008). This sense of cohesion, facilitated by and pivotal to the AT process, resembles the Adlerian concept of belonging. Further, cohesion is necessary for the development of social interest (Dreikurs, 1991). The concept of social interest guides the AT practitioner's choice to sequence activities in ways that foster feelings of belonging and group cohesion.

To appropriately sequence activities, therapists use assessment techniques to gauge participants' emotional and cognitive maturity, as well as any mental or physical disabilities that might affect their involvement (Christian et al., 2019; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Because Adler (1927/1954) taught that play reveals a person's lifestyle, it makes sense to not only use assessments to effectively sequence activities, but to also use the activities themselves as assessment tools.

Further, a person's creative way of striving for superiority is revealed in the way they play games (Adler, 1938). Therefore, adventure activities provide an opportunity to see participants' approach to life or their lifestyle. Also, because struggle exists in real life, therapists can use adventure activities to prepare participants for life, a practice Adler (1938) believed necessary to instill courage needed for social interest.

Finally, therapists must ensure they have the skills needed to implement selected activities. Two basic skill sets are essential to competently facilitate AT: clinical skills and technical skills (Christian & Perryman, 2018; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Therapists facilitating AT attain clinical skills by completing a graduate degree in mental health. They can gain the technical skills necessary through workshops, conferences, and specific graduate level programs (Christian & Perryman, 2018). The integration of clinical and technical skills results in the development of metaskills used to foster client growth (Christian & Perryman, 2018). It is in relation to metaskills that Adlerian theory is especially useful to therapists facilitating AT. They can use Adlerian theory to guide their intentional selection, implementation, and completion of adventure activities. Further, the Adlerian belief that natural consequences are “powerful influences on behavior” (Sweeney, 2019, p. 76) supports their use and ultimate importance to the AT process (Christian et al., 2019; Hill, 2007). Finally, using Adlerian theory to guide AT is an answer to the call for additional techniques therapists can use to address clients’ needs (Dinkmeyer et al., 1987).

Culturally Responsive Practice

A Function of Social Interest

Due to the nature of AT’s environmental setting and its application with diverse populations, TAPG (n.d.) highlights several cultural considerations. These considerations address the need for therapists to understand the disparities of cultural representation and how cultural groups perceive shared experiences differently. TAPG exhorts therapists to prepare for culturally responsive practice, a preparation that involves therapists exploring, understanding, and challenging their biases and worldviews. AT practitioners operating from Adlerian theory readily address these cultural considerations because social interest motivates and energizes

therapists to prepare themselves for culturally responsive counseling practice. This idea of preparation is ubiquitous in Adler's (1938) discussion of social interest, where he stressed that too little social interest "causes an insufficient preparation for all the problems of life" (p. 62). Conversely, a healthy degree of social interest encourages therapists to prepare for work with clients of various cultures. Social interest not only encourages cultural responsiveness, but also guides therapists to approach this task in a way that benefits individual group members and the group as a whole. Becoming culturally responsive is a function of social interest. Indeed, this agrees with the first basic premise Sperry (2012) listed for cultural competence, which describes what should be a positive correlation between social interest and cultural competence.

Providing Clear Vision

Phenomenology and social embeddedness can provide clearer vision for AT practitioners who, through social interest, strive to become culturally responsive therapists. The belief in phenomenology encourages therapists to explore participants' unique perspectives of the adventure experiences as well as consider how previous experiences outside the AT context might influence their current perceptions and behavior. Complementing phenomenology, the belief in social embeddedness engenders therapists to view people as social beings who live in a social and cultural context, a context that affects the way they perceive and experience adventure activities and environments (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999).

More Than Awareness

Norton and Hsieh (2011) stressed the therapists' obligation to develop awareness of their own and their client's worldviews and how these worldviews differ and agree. Harmonizing with this obligation, AT practitioners using Adlerian theory seek to understand their own and their client's lifestyles. Recall that the lifestyle includes beliefs about self, others, and the world

(Sweeney, 2019), beliefs that are, in part, based on how they perceive their unique social and cultural positions (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999). But clients need therapists to do more than increase awareness; they need therapists to build cultural bridges (Norton & Hsieh, 2011). To that end, attending to lifestyles can help AT practitioners heed Norton and Hsieh's (2011) call for cultural bridging, a process where AT practitioners attend to the similarities and differences in their own and their clients' worldviews and show interest in and recognition of the others' culture, modifying treatment as needed. Therapists build cultural bridges as they collaboratively engage clients of different cultures for the purpose of molding the adventure in culturally relevant ways. Awareness is therefore the beginning—engagement and responsiveness the follow through.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Adlerian theory provides a useful theory to guide AT. Therapists using AT can assess participants based on private logic, mistaken beliefs, lifestyle, and social interest. They can then sequence activities to attain the ultimate goals of Adlerian therapy: encouragement, reduced feelings of inferiority, and increased social interest. More specifically, therapists sequence activities to build egalitarian relationships, investigate the participants' lifestyles, help participants gain insight and awareness into their behavior, and reorient their behavior in a manner that helps the group be successful. Finally, through the experiential learning cycle, participants can transform insights gained through the adventure activities into actions in life outside of the AT experience.

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