

# Parallels Between Adlerian Psychology and the Afro-American Value System\*

Jacqueline F. Brown  
Bowie State College

Afro-Americans have been labeled as non-users of Mental Health programs. Another way of viewing this situation might be that Mental Health programs have been non-users of the Afro-American cultural value system as a basis from which to develop services for these clients. Implicit in many criticisms of non-use of Mental Health programs is the assumption that the clients have problems because they do not adhere to the proper value system, the Euro-American system which underlies much mental health planning. This assumption has led to the phrase "culturally deprived." Adlerian psychology offers an approach that is compatible with both mental health goals and the Afro-American cultural value system.

## Cultural Value Systems

A cultural value system is the summation of all the beliefs that have evolved as a group finds the most efficient method of survival in various environments, both geographical and sociological. In Adlerian terms, a cultural value system is a view of the world shared by a community or group of people which is considered to be "common sense" by that group. It is this "understanding of actions and conduct by which the commonweal finds expression" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 149) that provides the backdrop from which individuals in that group make decisions that influence their life styles.

There are two contrasting value systems that create controversy in this country: the Euro-American and the Afro-American. The degree of purity for each system is effected by the formal education and economic status of group members.

Cultural value systems can be defined in terms of their components:

---

\*Presented to the National Convention of the American Society of Adlerian Psychology, New York, New York, May 25, 1975.

Axiology—the index of self-worth, Epistemology—measure of self-worth, Logic—thought system, and Essence—focal point in time.

**Table 1**  
**Cultural Value Systems**

<i>Culture</i>	<i>Axiology</i>	<i>Epistemology</i>	<i>Logic</i>	<i>Essence</i>
Euro-American	Man to Object	Sensory Cognitive	Either/Or	Becoming
Afro-American	Man to Man	Affect/Symbolic Imagery	Diunital/Combination of Opposites	Being

*Axiology.* To understand the early Euro-American axiology it is necessary to understand why this group left Europe. They did not have the right to express their religious beliefs and vestiges of the feudal system still existed. Royalty and the landed gentry had status and position based on possessions—castles, livestock, land, and sufficient food. When the Euro-Americans came to the new land, their common goal might have been expressed as follows:

I am going to have the freedom to worship the way I please and I am also going to have a chance to be somebody of value and importance. My feelings of self-worth will be related directly to how many objects and things I can now acquire.

The self-worth statement for the Euro-American cultural value system developed into a relationship of *Person to Object*.

The first Afro-Americans left Africa involuntarily. All the material possessions and traditions that had made them feel secure in their homeland were taken from them. They had to survive in a country where they were not only a minority, but where the majority had established a position of power based on the acquisition of objects. Afro-Americans would have no objects on which to base their self-worth. Thus, a cultural value system developed based on individual relationships. The self-worth statement developed from the relationship of *Person to Person*. The difference in axiology for the two groups was established as early as 1619 when John Hawkins imported the first slaves.

*Epistemology.* Since the Euro-Americans based their self-worth on a relationship between Person and Object, the epistemology or evidence of movement toward self-worth would have to be done through a sensory process. Objects are external and tangible things, thus, the evaluation system

must allow one to measure, weigh, touch, smell, or taste in order to gauge the existence of the object. A traditional riddle which illustrates the Euro-American cognitive process states: "If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?" The riddle is reasonable if one adheres to a cognitive process by which things exist only if they can be known through the five senses.

On the other hand, Afro-Americans had to develop ways of evaluating Person to Person relationships. To measure an intangible requires the use of affect or symbolic imagery. The richness and quality of the relationship becomes the means of measuring movement toward self-worth. An example of affect and symbolic imagery is an Afro-American proverb stating: "We were so happy and so full of joy and had such a good time, that when we left the room it was filled with laughter."

For both systems, the epistemology not only is the method of knowing self-worth, but also is the determinant of linguistic expressions of self-worth.

*Logic.* Since the Euro-American system must answer the question of whether an object exists or whether it does not exist, the thinking process which evolved was one of either/or. Either you have it or you don't. Either you are good or you are bad. Either you are a hippie or you are straight. America—love it or leave it?

In the Afro-American system, the thinking process which evolved was one that could assess the person thematically and not just segmentally. This thinking process might be called diunital thinking, or a combination of opposites. Therefore, you have statements such as "America is certainly a racist, rotten country, but it sure has been good to me!" This combination of opposites and diunital thinking is how American Black ghetto children survive Ivory Snow commercials.

*Essence.* The Euro-American axiology concentrated on movement in terms of the future, acquiring new objects equaled bettering oneself. Thus, Euro-Americans are on a constant treadmill of acquisition with an emphasis on Becoming. "What are you going to be when you grow up?" "What are you going to have?" These are Euro-American cultural value system questions.

Afro-Americans have stressed interaction in the present moment, they are most concerned with Being. This is very evident in the use of language, many Afro-Americans are quite comfortable saying, "I be there," or "Things do be that way sometimes." It is not a slip of the tongue or a contradiction of the "King's English," but rather a statement of value belief and essence.

## Adlerian Principles and Afro-American Cultural Value System

Adlerian principles parallel much of the Afro-American value system. For example, a classical Adlerian view is that man is a social being who finds his place and value in his relationships to other human beings. This is clearly a Person to Person statement. Another Adlerian perspective is the concept of life style based on private logic and private apperceptions of the world. Early recollections help us to recognize ideas and values which are operating in our life. The recollections do not have to be true, it is the feeling, attitude, or weltbild that the individual feels. When a professional in the mental health field correctly uses early recollections to assess the logic of the individual, he is dealing with affect and symbolic imagery. Adler also emphasized that people are unique and combine many things in many ways to form a style or theme for themselves (Adler, 1964). Diunital thinking or combination of opposites is necessary if one is to develop skills which unify apparent contradictions. A final Adlerian precept which parallels the essence of the Afro-American value system is the emphasis on understanding what is "happening now" so that the client can decide what he would like to have "happen" in the future.

Adlerian psychology speaks to the mental health needs of Afro-Americans in many ways. It is an optimistic psychology for an oppressed people, "Things can change." It is a power psychology for a people who are suffering from a feeling of powerlessness, "Given an environment, what have you decided to do with it?" It is a creative psychology for a people who are conditioned only to react and respond through roles that others have created for them "You are unique, use that uniqueness to come up with alternatives and solutions." It is an encouraging psychology for a discouraged people, "We are all imperfect, but we can keep growing and learning from each other." Finally, it is a respectful psychology for a people who have received very little respect. An Adlerian mental health worker wants to know the client's view of the world, the client is truly a co-educator and a co-therapist.

For Afro-Americans, Adlerian psychology provides the courage to begin concentrating on the future. Not only are Adlerians saying that Afro-Americans have a future, but that they have some kind of input and initiating power by which to decide what that future will be. In Adlerian psychology there is an optimism based on the expectation that human beings are capable of changing. The Afro-American cultural value system was concerned with Being because the group was not sure that there was a future. Adlerian psychology can start people thinking in terms of the future and what they can do now to make an imprint on it.

The Adlerian philosophical perspectives have some very positive implications for the Afro-American client and the Afro-American profes-

sional. Much of Adlerian theory can be assimilated into the Afro-American cultural value system. An Adlerian approach can bring an exciting, relevant, and creative dimension to the Afro-American mental health process.

### References

- Ansbacher, H.L., & Ansbacher, R.R., *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*, New York, New York: Harper & Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1956.
- Adler, A.; *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind*, New York, New York: Capricorn Books, 1964.