

# Adler's Common Sense: The Wisdom of the Alley

Roman Borboa and Béatrice Borboa

## Abstract

The authors, a mixed culture (Mexican and Swiss) married couple who specialize in cross-cultural counseling open the article by sharing about their initial Adlerian education received at the University of Arizona, followed by years of traveling to continue their training. They also share their common interest in learning how to apply Adler's common sense theory or what the authors came to call "the wisdom of the alley" (Böhringer, 1985) to cross-cultural counseling. The final section of the article intertwines the comments of several cross-cultural theorists with Adlerian thought to reveal their common sense compatibility.

*Keywords:* cross-cultural counseling, Adlerian psychology, Individual Psychology

## Our Beginnings

The year 1978 was a key one for us. Roman finished his undergraduate degree with a major in psychology and a minor in sociology, and Béatrice finished hers in English literature. That same year gave the world a handful of science-based outcomes: smallpox was eradicated and the first birth by in vitro fertilization was made possible. It was also the year that brought Roman to focus on his future professional orientation because of the influence of Dean Richard Boller in the liberal arts college at the University of Arizona (U of A), our alma mater. When Roman told him of his interest in becoming a marriage counselor, Boller suggested he go to visit the counseling department right there at U of A.

"Talk to Oscar Christensen, probably one of the most successful counselors in the USA," he said. This encounter was the beginning of our journey into counseling and it was there that we found Individual Psychology.

We counselors and psychotherapists learn our occupation from the experiences of mentors. As David Keith (2015) wrote, "First we become learners of therapy; second, we learn how to do therapy; and third, we become therapeutic" (p. 2).

In our case, the learning began with our major adviser Betty J. Newlon, who was an experienced Adlerian counselor, associate professor of counseling and guidance, and director of the career counseling program at the U of A. She influenced our learning of Adlerian working methods and touched

our personal lives. Betty became a mentor and a friend to us. She shared her philosophy of life with us through modeling and it has accompanied us throughout our personal and professional lives. It can be summed up in the following saying that, for us, characterized her approach to work: "Life is what it is, and one does as little complaining as possible and does not postpone duties and obligations. Just get things done."

This position toward life can be understood in ethical terms, which has the merit of standing out as a set of values, including responsibility, intersubjectivity, and sociability—all of which are Adlerian constructs. This attitude was well established in both of us but especially into Roman as Betty's research assistant for several years. It remains a core part of our psychotherapeutic approach with clients.

Oscar C. Christensen Jr., a professor in the Department of Counseling and Guidance became another giant of a mentor. Chris left a deeply rooted mark because he truly lived Adlerian psychology as a philosophy of life 24/7. Chris, as those close to Dr. Christensen called him, had long been a leading authority in Adlerian psychology. Having studied and trained directly with Rudolf Dreikurs, Chris was a living model of Individual Psychology throughout his life. He modeled and taught Adlerian Individual Psychology through his daily actions. He made it come alive when he said to Roman, "If you want to learn something, the best way is teaching it." When I was ready to learn how to practice counseling, I was honored to become his teaching assistant in family and marital counseling.

One unforgettable experience for us, among countless others, was the day after our work at a conference in Mexico. We went to take a walk in the sunshine in an alley-like road. John and Ann Platt (also Adlerians and ex-students of Chris's), Chris, and his wife, Mary, joined us. Chris very keenly observed a group of children playing on a tree along the road. He noticed among the kids one child with Down syndrome playing along with all the rest of them and said: "Notice, this demonstrates once again, that no matter what you look like or how 'different' others might consider you, as long as you have a feeling of belonging and equality one can certainly contribute." This is an Adlerian attitude that Adler (1931/1958) himself wrote about in his book *What Life Should Mean to You*: "We are living in association with others through friendship, social feelings . . . we need to find a position among our fellows so that we may cooperate" (p. 54). This was Chris's constant outlook: the common sense as optimistic, encouraging and very human, an illustration of what Böhlinger (1985) called Adler's "wisdom of the alley."

A third champion who took us under his wing, for a limited period, was Achi Yotam. We did our "advanced" Adlerian training in Tel Aviv at the Adler Institute with Achi and Mika Katz, among others. Throughout the years, he visited us in Arizona as well as Zurich, Switzerland, where we had come to live and practice in the mid-1980s. During one of his visits to Zurich, he

asked us about the city and what he should visit. Achi was a very curious person by nature as well as very interested in social, community problems. It did not take long for him to discover what was known as the “Platzspitz,” a park known for the consumption of drugs and substance abuse in downtown Zurich. He immediately decided to go and walk around there, establishing contact with various addicts as well as social workers, which was his profession in Israel. His comment when he returned home was, “Such a problem would not exist in this rich society if people would accept and treat each other as equals, experiencing a feeling of belonging.” He thought that many societal problems could have been prevented with parenting education. Community involvement was his forte. He saw and understood human problems from a social perspective. He considered Individual Psychology as a set of principles that could be applied in all human relationships. He operationalized his work in family education to teach Adlerian psychology to the community. His biggest desire was to see Individual Psychology being used in communities. In Israel, his efforts involved working with both Palestinians and Israelis. He was a true cross-cultural change agent.

We also learned Individual Psychology through many seminars, attending the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology conferences and the International Committee of Adlerian Summer Schools and Institutes (ICASSI), where we benefited from the teaching and interaction with many Adlerians, like Leo Gold, Miriam Pew, Edna Nash, Arthur Clark, Harold Mosak, and many others. At ICASSI, we taught Adlerian cross-cultural counseling as well as the introductory course to Individual Psychology in German. Roman also has had the honor of receiving the William Pew scholarship to attend an ICASSI conference in Bad Gastein, Austria.

### **The Journey: Learning How To**

After we graduated with master’s degrees from the U of A, we moved to northern Mexico, where Roman accepted a position in a psychology program. He had the responsibility of teaching Introduction to Psychotherapy. This was an opportunity to introduce Individual Psychology, to share the theory, and to do demonstrations. This led to organizing Adlerian parent education programs in the community. Later, this experience was the basis for a portion of Roman’s doctoral dissertation, “An Adlerian Mothers’ Study Group in a Mexican Community” (1985). To our knowledge, this was a pioneering piece of work; the positive results validated the Adlerian parent education model in Mexico. Later, *Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research and Practice* published an article about the effects of Adlerian parent study groups on Mexican mothers’ perception of child behavior (Newlon et al., 1986). This last study was published as a

pamphlet that we use in our parent education effort in the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

The next phase of learning “how to” involved internships and practice in various mental health agencies in southern Arizona for both of us. The Career Information and Resource Center of Arizona (CIRCA), located in the counseling department at U of A, provided services to the university population as well as to the Tucson community. It provided services mostly based on the Adlerian approach. There we got the necessary counseling experience, which included all sorts of members of the community and international clients, all supervised by Adlerian professors. The learning was extended to the university’s rehabilitation education department with mostly members of different national and ethnic backgrounds. The other internships were done in mental health clinics with a heavy demand from Mexican American people, Mexican immigrants, and other ethnic groups in southern Arizona.

Once we felt equipped with the necessary experience and knowledge, we moved to reside and practice in Switzerland. Given our backgrounds and crossing borders, we became cross-cultural counselors.

### **Where We Are Today: Being Therapeutic**

Since our beginnings, we have been practicing cross-cultural counseling. Béatrice being Swiss, and Roman being Mexican means that we are each trilingual—German, Spanish, and English. We have practiced and lived in Mexico, the United States, and Switzerland. In Renton, Washington, Roman was invited to work for a private university, City University of Bellevue, where he was dean for the School of Behavioral Sciences while Béatrice worked in a mental health clinic. The school included the counseling department as well as a leadership school. The main achievements were the opening of a mental health clinic and an extension of the counseling department to Vancouver, British Columbia. Individual Psychology is very well established there due to the pioneering work of Edna Nash, Clair Hawes and others.

After returning to Switzerland in 2000, we have worked in various countries in Europe and Latin America. Furthermore, Roman has acted as a board member as well as president of the Swiss Society of Individual Psychology—Alfred Adler (SGIPA), which had, in those days, a long-standing training school for psychotherapists and counselors. Among other offerings, its curriculum included special training for counselors to work with senior citizens. Today, the training has been restructured to better serve our communities.

As a social psychology and rooted in the social world, Adlerian psychology has served as a basis for our work—understanding any counseling

relationship in which two or more of the participants are culturally different, to be cross-cultural (see Atkinson et al., 1989). The fact that no one exists outside society has grounded our approach to serving others.

Recognizing that we humans are born into groups, known as societies, means all humans are social. This leads to the assumption that a person needs to be understood in relation to the surrounding context. This requires, then, a holistic consideration of the human psyche. People are indivisible, social, and creative. Our physical movement, consciousness, soma, and psyche are a unity, holistic. This conception fits well the notion of cross-cultural counseling, where the counselor examines the client's environment, interactions, including the cultural frame of reference. However, in our actual work, we do not categorize people into groups, such as "minorities." A major reason is the equality demanded by all humans. Already in 1946, Dreikurs spoke about it, indicating that all people demand equality, because we all have the same rights and privileges by the right of birth. We investigate an individual's cultural belief system and cultural background as well as personal history and social system as part of their affecting the person's subjective apperception and uniqueness.

Here is where the "wisdom of the alley" makes a difference. Common sense is the "sense of reality" says Kluy (2019). "This means that counseling in Adlerian terms means to show a client the limitation of a reductionist private logic, which separates the person from common sense. The need is then to help the client build up their social interest as an ethical investment" (Kluy, 2019, p. 178).

Böhringer (1985) considered that, for Adler, common sense was a sixth sense: "The ability to intuitively guess correctly and to behave right, i.e., not to compensate too much" (p. 71). This links compensation to apperception, our personal sense of reality. What and how we think comes to be our personal reality. This explains how we come to take our own view as relative truth in relation to our environment. We seem to strive to change it, to overcome it by tending to simplify the world. The result are fictions that are created and within them reside our perception, which then guides our actions. Simplification, fictions, and the richness of the world then help us navigate the *sensus communis*: "All emotional and mental contact with reality occurs through the imagery by which reality is represented" (Benda, 1961, p. 25).

Common sense supports Adler's view that Individual Psychology is a psychology of use. "People are not considered by the characteristics they possess, but by the art and form of how they use them" (Böhringer, 1985, p. 64). This is the base of our cross-cultural work.

Ansbacher indicates that a psychology of use lends itself to assist clients in learning to live a courageous and optimistic life (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 14). Cross-cultural counseling is tinted with optimism toward humanity

because we understand we are all striving toward becoming. This is in line with the Adlerian postulate that our human understanding is subjective. Furthermore, it brings into focus social interest, a vital construct in working cross-culturally. Social interest attests that no matter what background we possess, that we are beings of value, who deserve respect and dignity and belong to human society. Adler reportedly called it “the iron-clad logic of social living.”

We can state without hesitancy that Adlerian counseling is in harmony and sensitive to cross-cultural approaches to counseling. As noted, the right of every human for respect, dignity, and self-value enriches the counselor–client relationship, emphasizing a holistic approach that considers mind, body, and spirit (McKay et al., 2009), all done in the client’s context. Arciniega and Newlon (2003) stated that “client and therapist work together considering the society networks in order to identify and to decide what to change” (p. 436).

To conclude, cross-cultural counseling, through its emphasis on teaching and learning to contribute, improves our belief in the value and worth of all members of society. By turning feelings of inferiority into social equality, we become fully functional in our *sensus communis*.

---

## References

---

- Adler, A. (1958). *What life should mean to you*. Capricorn. (Original work published 1931)
- Ansbacher, H. L. (1978). The development of Adler’s concept of social interest: A critical study. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 34(2), 118–152.
- Arciniega, M., & Newlon, B. J. (2003). Counseling and psychotherapy: Multicultural considerations. In D. Capuzz & D. Cross (Eds.), *Counseling and psychotherapy: Theories and interventions* (3rd ed., pp. 417–441). Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Atkinson, D. R., Morten, G., & Sue, D. W. (1989). *Counseling American minorities: A cross-cultural perspective* (3rd ed.). WCB Publishers.
- Benda, C. E. (1961). “Narcissism” in psychoanalysis and the “love of oneself” in existential psychotherapy. In W. E. O’Connell (Ed.), *Psychotherapy: Theoretical and technical readings* (pp. 17–38). MSS Information Corp.
- Böhringer, H. (1985). *Compensation und Common Sense: Zur Lebensphilosophie Alfred Adlers* [Compensation and common sense: On Alfred Adler’s philosophy of life]. Hain Verlag bei Athenäum.
- Borboa, R. (1985). *An Adlerian mothers’ study group in a Mexican community* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Arizona, Tucson.

- Dreikurs, R. (1946). *The challenge of marriage*. Hawthorn Books.
- Keith, D. (2015). *Continuing the experiential approach of Carl Whitaker: Process, practice, and magic*. Zeig, Tucker & Theisen.
- Kluy, A. (2019). *Alfred Adler: Die Vermessung der Menschlichen Psyche* [Alfred Adler: The measurement of the human psyche]. Verlagsgruppe Random House.
- McKay, G. D, Peate, W. F., & Mansager, E. (2009). *Body, mind, and spirit: "Vitamins" for your whole health*. Impact Pub.
- Newlon, B. J., Borboa, R., & Arciniega, M. (1986). The effects of Adlerian parent study groups upon Mexican mothers' perception of child behavior. *Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research and Practice*, 42(1) 107–113.

**Roman Borboa**, PhD, is a licensed psychological psychotherapist in Switzerland who works with individuals and organizations. He is the main principal of Borboa & Partners and a faculty member at SBS Swiss Business School in Zurich.

**Béatrice Borboa**, MEd, is a licensed psychotherapist in Switzerland. She works in both private practice and clinical settings.

Copyright of Journal of Individual Psychology is the property of University of Texas Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.