

Examining the Nature of Holism Within Lifestyle

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Abstract

The author compares the Adlerian concept of lifestyle to chaos theory, an interdisciplinary science that studies dynamic phenomena and that operates on holistic principles. After providing a brief overview of chaos theory and various definitions and properties of lifestyle, the author assesses the Adlerian notion of lifestyle according to selected aspects of chaos theory. Theoretical and clinical implications complete the article.

Holism is an integral assumption of Individual Psychology. It means that aspects of a person connect to other aspects of that person in systematic and dynamic ways. These aspects include thoughts and feelings and purposive symptoms (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Holism also means that activities toward a person's life tasks relate to one another. For instance, stress that results from lack of self-care can affect work productivity or relationship satisfaction (Moses, 1995). Even within a single life task, certain elements or interactions can affect that life task. As an example, receiving respect and admiring comments from co-workers or supervisors can have a positive effect on subsequent work efficiency, work satisfaction, and general well being in the workplace (Moses). Holism has a further meaning: Biological and social factors must be considered and weighed equally when seeking to understand someone's lifestyle or more transient attitude as guided by the lifestyle (Ansbacher & Ansbacher).

The above delineations stem from a single conviction that defines holism: The only way to understand a system is to understand that entire system. There is a qualitative distinction between the whole and the sum of its parts. The whole cannot be understood by examining the parts in isolation from the entire system.

This perspective is new as regards Western scientific and cultural developments over the past few centuries. However, as Capra (1996) and Bütz (1997) have demonstrated, the holistic perspective has existed in various forms for at least two millennia. This "new" perspective is in fact a renewed focus on pattern rather than substance. In recent decades, researchers in various fields of study have rediscovered the "pattern" side to this long, unsettled deliberation, and they have attributed different names to the theory or model that reflects this pattern approach, such as cybernetics, Gaia hypothesis, Gestalt psychology, and chaos theory (Capra).

Several Adlerian concepts and philosophical assumptions reflect this pattern approach, including holism, teleology, social embeddedness, subjectivity and phenomenology, "soft determinism," choices, and creativity. (See Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, for definitions and descriptions of these concepts and assumptions.) In this article, lifestyle is viewed as the central Adlerian concept insofar as it reflects the unique convergence of the above concepts and assumptions within each person.

Acknowledging that dynamic properties exist within systems, the theories and models named above, including Individual Psychology, seek to answer the corollary question: How do systems interconnect? To that end, I will draw connections between Individual Psychology—lifestyle in particular—and chaos theory. Chaos theory has been chosen over the other above-named models and theories for two reasons. One, investigations in chaos theory have demonstrated a teleological dynamic in systems, thus providing connections to two underlying assumptions of Individual Psychology. The second reason for choosing chaos theory is that it makes explicit use of mathematics in the quest to understand phenomena. While the mathematics is beyond the scope of this article, I do raise the implications of mathematical applications to Individual Psychology later in the article.

Chaos Theory—An Overview

Chaos theory does not address randomness or chaos per se. Rather, chaos theory addresses nonlinear systems—systems that demonstrate underlying pattern yet which *appear* random or chaotic (Bütz, 1997; Cohen & Stewart, 1994; Gleick, 1987). Examples of nonlinear systems are weather systems and population growth patterns. Chaos theory's holistic focus on process and relationships rather than a reductionistic or mechanistic focus on objects or substance enables the discovery of these patterns. Several key aspects of chaos theory are listed below with relevant descriptions and/or explanations.

Self-organization. Chaos theory recognizes that systems are self-organizing. In other words, they consist of ordered patterns that emerge spontaneously from randomness. Such patterns have been observed, for instance, in boiling water, the formation of laser light, and psychological processes (Bütz, 1997; Gleick, 1987). Self-organizing systems should meet three criteria (Capra, 1996):

1. They should have the capacity to create new systems of organization through "processes of development, learning, and evolution" (p. 85).
2. The emergence of ordered patterns from self-organizing systems—be they new behavioral styles or new structures—become

apparent only when those systems are far from a state of balance as implied by terms such as "equilibrium" or "homeostasis."

3. There must exist a "nonlinear interconnectedness of the system's components" (p. 85). In other words, the aspects of a system connect in ways that do not fit linear or traditionally predictable manners.

Teleology. Studies have shown that a chaotic system's dynamic activity is oriented teleologically. This has been demonstrated dramatically through the concept of a "strange attractor" (Gleick, 1987). A strange attractor is a point or state around which a system's activity is centered, yet that point is never reached. Graphically, this has been displayed as a series of concentric "figure eight" shapes that never repeat themselves and that display an overall dynamic regularity. Researchers have postulated that a central attractor maintains the dynamic pattern of these orbits in a teleological fashion (Gleick).

Global stability with local unpredictability. This aspect is likely the reason for the potential misunderstanding of the term "chaos" as it is used in chaos theory. The local unpredictability of a system gives it its chaotic appearance. However, amidst that seeming unpredictability, a global stability keeps the system from breaking down; it maintains the system's pattern. As Gleick (1987) wrote, "A chaotic system could be stable if its particular brand of irregularity persisted in the face of small disturbances" (p. 48). A system's global stability reveals a pattern that was further described by Gleick: "Nature forms patterns. Some are orderly in space but disorderly in time, others orderly in time but disorderly in space. Some patterns are fractal, exhibiting structures self-similar in scale. Others give rise to steady states or oscillating ones" (p. 308).

Sensitive dependence on initial conditions. Edward Lorenz unwittingly stumbled upon this observation in 1961 (Gleick, 1987). The suggestion here is that systems are remarkably sensitive to internal and external conditions. Even slight differences in initial conditions affect the development of that system in quantity as well as quality. To use an example of boiling water, adding more heat to a container of water will not just lead the water to its boiling point more quickly. It will also change the pattern of boiling. This aspect of chaos theory highlights the limitations of linear methods when inquiring into the nature of nonlinear, or dynamic, systems. Dependence on initial conditions is so sensitive that Gleick suggested that while solving a two-factor problem is relatively simple, when a third factor is added the problem is often impossible to solve with a significant degree of accuracy over time.

Simplicity and complexity. Perhaps the most dramatic and unexpected finding of chaos theory is that simple and complex systems are not always what they appear. Whereas a mechanistic belief is that simple systems

behave in simple ways and that complex systems behave in complex ways, empirical findings in chaos theory support the belief that simple systems often produce complex behavior while complex systems often produce simple behavior. Increasing studies into simplicity and complexity reveal levels of richness in the structure of reality that were previously unrecognized. As Cohen and Stewart (1994) wrote, "Complexity at any given level is a consequence of the operation of relatively simple rules one level lower down. Simplicity breeds complexity through sheer multiplication of possibilities" (p. 219).

Lifestyle Defined

Lifestyle represents the dynamic pattern of living within each person. Generic definitions of lifestyle include law of movement (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956), unique style of living (Powers & Griffith, 1987), and a kind of life plan (Gold, 1981). Shulman and Mosak (1988) defined lifestyle in part as, "a singular pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting that was unique to that individual" (p. 1). Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) further observed that lifestyle often is equated with terms such as ego, self, and personality. However, lifestyle differs from such terms because it relates to patterns in a person's life rather than traits or qualities (Eckstein & Baruth, 1996). Examining personality in terms of traits or qualities suggests that someone has or lacks the trait or quality in question rather than emphasizing a person's dynamic and creative tendency to use what is available either from within him or her or from his or her surroundings.

Several writers have agreed on general properties that relate to lifestyle (e.g., Ansbacher, 1967; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Eckstein & Baruth, 1996; Powers & Griffith, 1987; Shulman & Mosak, 1988). These properties include constancy, unity, creativity, subjectivity, and a teleological orientation. A lifestyle, then, is a dynamic, goal-oriented pattern that remains constant during a person's life, unites all aspects of a person, and reflects how a person makes creative use of the subjective understanding of his or her surroundings.

Lifestyle and Chaos Theory

Chaos theory suggests that a person can be viewed as a physical system whose operations may appear chaotic or random yet which reveal an underlying pattern or order on closer examination. This pattern or order resides on biological, psychological, and social levels (Bütz, 1997). Individual Psychology suggests that each person's lifestyle is an underlying pattern that guides

behavior, thoughts, and feelings, even if these aspects of a person seem related only superficially or not at all. Individual Psychology recognizes this pattern as movement; hence, the definition of lifestyle by Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956) provided earlier as the law of movement. The concept of movement is a crucial one insofar as it presupposes the constant motion of dynamic activity rather than the application of fixed and unalterable traits. Given the similarities thus far between lifestyle and chaos theory of a holistic approach, a teleological focus, and a dynamic influence, in the next section, I examine lifestyle according to the aspects of chaos theory outlined above.

Self-organization. Regarding the first criterion for a self-organizing system, a lifestyle is formed through processes of learning and development—even through a process of evolving systems of thinking, feeling, and acting, if that metaphor is to be employed (Powers & Griffith, 1987). The second criterion for lifestyle as a self-organizing system is apparent not just in the development of a lifestyle but also in the process of lifestyle changes. Whether lifestyle changes occur through religious experience, therapy, or traumatic experiences (Strauch, 2001), these changes occur only when the system, or person, is in distress, reflecting a state of balance far from equilibrium or homeostasis. As lifestyle represents an underlying pattern in a person's life, it meets the third criterion for self-organization of "nonlinear interconnectedness" of all aspects of the person (Capra, 1996).

Teleology. Individual Psychology considers all of a person's operations as guided toward a specific state or moment in the future. The concept of a fictional goal (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) reflects this notion and can be compared to chaos theory's concept of a strange attractor. In much the same way that the strange attractor maintains the pattern surrounding it, a person's operations over time also can be conceived as a pattern that a person forms around the strange attractor or fictional goal of the lifestyle.

Global stability with local unpredictability. As lifestyle represents an underlying pattern or stability in a person's life, it stands to reason that unpredictability arises locally, or over the short-term. The local unpredictability of a person relates to Individual Psychology's notion of how a person always uses biology and environment *creatively* in line with his or her lifestyle. Adler's notion of creativity may not be limited to human operations. Gleick (1987) observed that creativity is inherent in many systems. For example, "A real-world fluid, even in a stripped-down millimeter cell, has the undeniable potential for all the free, untrammled motion of natural disorder. It has the potential for surprise" (p. 210).

Sensitive dependence on initial conditions. Of course, the first question to answer is: When are the initial conditions? Are they at the moment of birth, conception, the parents' meeting, or the parents' births? Such considerations make evident the richness and complexity of life's many interactions.

For this reason, Adler's notion of use becomes all the more relevant. Rather than trying to ascertain all factors on which a person is so sensitively dependent, a focus on how a person uses what is at his or her disposal becomes a more useful and practical exercise.

Simplicity and complexity. Recognizing the nonlinear and dynamic aspects of simplicity and complexity, the question can be asked: Is a person a simple system that acts in complex ways or a complex system that acts in simple ways? The answer is *both*. A person is capable of complex biological, psychological, and social operations, yet this complexity arises from only four relatively simple elements comprised in DNA. On the other hand, a person's complexity leads to some seemingly simple operations such as digesting, thinking, and feeling. A further example regards lifestyle convictions. A lifestyle can be understood in simple terms such as convictions, and therapeutic change can result from an understanding of a client's lifestyle convictions. However, the apparent simplicity of convictions or, really, behavior in any given circumstance belies the complexity of lifestyle as evident in its creative and dynamic qualities.

Theoretical Implications

In examining the complexity of systems, Gleick (1987) asked whether climate exists. His meaning was: Does climate have an average, or does its holistic and complex nature prevent an average from forming? Given the holistic and complex nature of lifestyle, it is interesting to ask an analogous question. Does lifestyle exist? Does the complex and teleological arrangement of a person's psychological makeup allow an average or standard to be realized? Practitioners of Individual Psychology will say yes, it does. Practitioners of Individual Psychology can recognize a teleologically oriented pattern that guides the behavior, thoughts, and feelings of a client. Of interest is the recognition that a person's behavioral, cognitive, and emotional pattern does not fall into a repetitive steady state. Rather, recognizing the lifestyle pattern to a person's nonrepetitive yet intricately organized conduct allows for a greater appreciation and respect for someone's creativity.

A second issue relates to creativity more directly. Can it be inferred, as understanding increases into the rich layers and unpredictable nature of complexity in fields such as biology, ecology, physics, and psychology, that an individual's creative power will be less important as a factor in therapeutic progress and, more generally, in a person's life? Will further investigation into chaos theory or nonlinear dynamics in general "solidify" lifestyle into an equation, rendering it predictable? The writings of Gleick (1987) suggest that

this would not seem to be possible. He wrote that understanding the nuances and intricacies of a two-component system is relatively simple. However, adding even one more component makes such understanding exceedingly difficult: "long-term questions about a three-body system cannot be answered" (p. 145). Further, to re-employ the quotation provided above, Gleick (1987) wrote that, "A real-world fluid, even in a stripped-down millimeter cell, has the undeniable potential for all the free, untrammelled motion of natural disorder. It has the potential for surprise" (p. 210). If such potential exists within such a small amount of fluid and if long-term questions cannot be answered about systems with more than two components or factors, it is unlikely that creative decisions that a person makes could ever be pinpointed with any long-term accuracy.

The final and most important theoretical implication concerns how to regard the connections between lifestyle and chaos theory that are suggested in this paper. Are these connections to be regarded as an elaborate and fitting metaphor or analogy or, alternatively, do the connections between chaos theory and lifestyle reflect dynamic and nonlinear patterns that are inherent to all systems—large and small, organic and inorganic? As time passes and the relatively new field of inquiry of nonlinear dynamics is explored, an answer may be forthcoming.

Clinical Implications

As applied to the practice of Individual Psychology, chaos theory reinforces the centrality of encouragement in the therapeutic process. Gleick (1987) wrote that, "sensitive dependence on initial conditions serves not to destroy but to create" (p. 311). This acknowledgment parallels the Individual Psychology perspective that responses to environmental and biological conditions are creations of the individual that are designed to help the individual survive in his or her particular context rather than destructive efforts or attempts at self-sabotage. Such creations remain hidden, however, until the therapist and client recognize the individual's lifestyle. Also of curiosity is the suggestion regarding chaotic systems that "only a force from outside can force it to change states" (Gleick, p. 169). This is again parallel to therapeutic progress in that a client benefits from a lifestyle change only when some "force from outside" impinges on the system that is the individual—be it the words of a therapist, the actions of others in a group setting, or some other occurrence in or outside a therapeutic setting that leads to a moment of insight or what Mosak (1995) called an "A-ha" experience.

A further point to consider is the interrelationship between simplicity and complexity. Wherever a therapist begins an investigation into a client's

lifestyle, the therapeutic process weaves back and forth between simplicities and complexities that, alone and in combination, reflect a person's lifestyle from its development in childhood through to its reinforcement in adulthood. Another useful point to remember is that lifestyle convictions are cognitive aspects of a person's lifestyle that are relatively easy to focus on in therapy because, as therapists, we tend to think cognitively. However, lifestyle is more than convictions. It is an overall, organismic and even humanistic pattern (Ansbacher, 1967). Finally, the comparisons drawn between chaos theory and Individual Psychology may also lead to the question of whether psychopathology is chaos in some form (Bütz, 1997). It would seem, insofar as the chaos is really not chaotic at all but reveals an underlying order that is in line with all other aspects of the person, that psychopathological expressions are just as Adler suggested so many decades ago.

Conclusion

Parallels have been drawn between Individual Psychology and chaos theory through putting the holistic nature of lifestyle in a larger context. Elements of lifestyle have been compared to findings in chaos theory regarding complex, nonlinear, and dynamic systems. Theoretical and clinical implications to these connections were then addressed. The issue that arguably has the widest ramifications is whether the connections between lifestyle and chaos theory constitute a useful metaphor or whether they reveal that the phenomenon of underlying order amidst apparent chaos identified in physical and biological systems is the same phenomenon that Individual Psychology identifies as lifestyle.

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