Alfred Adler (1870–1937): Individual Psychology

Adler called his approach *individual* psychology because it expressed his belief that every human personality is unique and indivisible (Ewen, 1988). His emphasis on the individual did not preclude the social. The social element was an "all-important" factor since it is only in a social context that an individual becomes an individual.

Adler has been considered to be a disciple of Freud but he vehemently rejected that. As Adler stated (1938):

> Freud and his followers are uncommonly fond of describing me in an unmistakably boastful way as one of his disciples, because I had many an argument with him in a psychological group. But I never attended one of his lectures, and when this group was to be sworn in to support the Freudian views I was the first to leave it. (1938, p. 254)

> In my investigations concerning dreams I had two great aids. The first was provided by Freud, with his unacceptable views. I profited by his mistakes. I was never psycho-analyzed, and I would have at once rejected any such proposal, because the rigorous acceptance of his doctrine destroys scientific impartiality which in any case is not very great. (1938, p. 254)

Adler opposed Freud's insistence on sexuality as the center of human instinctual life. Instead, in his early theory he proposed that the basic human motive was aggression (which he admitted he borrowed from Freud—Freud would accuse him of plagiarism and heresy later on).

Adler emphasized conscious thought and social determinants. Personality was shaped by learning in a social environment. Furthermore, Freud's belief in unconscious motivation did not do justice to the fact that people are generally conscious of the reasons for their behavior. They are capable of making rational decisions regarding goals and plans. Individual psychology developed into a theory that is optimistic in contrast with Freud's pessimistic ideas about humanity. Over time the person develops, gains mastery over the environment, and forms a self. If all goes well, this person will be responsible to, and caring toward others.

The only way to study a human being is to study how the person moves in solving life problems (Adler, 1938). Each person enters life with their own unique set of potentialities and possibilities for development, and their actions are a means of determining these differences:

> The influences of both heredity and environment become the child's possession, and he uses them for the purpose of finding his path of development. But neither the path nor the movement can be thought of, or adopted, without a direction and a goal. *The goal of the human soul is conquest, perfection, security, superiority*. (Adler, 1938, p, 145)

Freud used the *genetic method* which meant he would trace current behaviors and psychological difficulties to their origins in childhood. To Adler the person's earliest memories give clues to the person's present and future identity (Ewen, 1988). Memories of infancy and childhood, whether accurate or not, provide important clues regarding one's *style of life* since they are influenced by self-selected goals. This lack of concern with the accuracy of memories was due to Adler's belief that it was how the person remembered childhood not the actual childhood. It reflected the person's perspective on, and interpretation of, that life. According to Adler, "The individual's interpretation of life is not a trivial matter, for it is the plumb-line of his thinking, feeling, and acting" (1938, p. 32). The same situations and the same experiences, the same life-problems, affect each person differently. To come to grips with this, the person's *style of life* (the unique mode of adjustment that characterizes an individual) has to be identified.

Personality Development

Just as mind evolved over millions of years, the traits of the individual themselves are a product of individual development (Adler, 1938). Like Freud he believed that personality is formed during the first five years. The style of life is established early and reflects the manner in which the individual has confronted three problems: the sense of inferiority, the struggle to overcome, and social feeling. Some years earlier Adler (1927) identified two major tendencies that are dominant in psychological life: the person's social feeling and the striving of the person for power and domination. Every activity and every attitude are influenced by these as the person strives to achieve security and to fulfill life's three main challenges: love, work, and society.

Social feeling referred to the person's innate sense of kinship with all of humanity and that was tied to evolved practices. As a species humans are rather weak and ill-equipped to stand alone against the forces of potential destruction. Humans overcame this weakness through collective action by banding together into communities. By working together humans have taken a dominant role in nature. It is our duty, he believed, and our nature to be responsible to each other. To lead an effective life, we must play our part in the collective operations of humanity. We have developed a division of labor that supports the operation of society and each person must either play her or his part or become anti-social and resign from that position. "Any man's value, therefore, is determined by his attitude toward his fellow men, and by the degree in which he partakes of the division of labor which communal life demands" (1927, p. 121).

Each person must play their part but their place in productive society is determined by their abilities. This division of labor is disturbed by those who do not take up their responsibilities or by those who block the effectiveness of communal life by their cravings for power. Self-serving personal power and dominance and class divisions are a reflection that collective social interest has not been perfected. Whether one will play their part will depend on their character development and that will depend on how they struggle with feelings of inferiority.

The Early Theory: Organ(ic) Inferiorities

Adler began his career as a physician and early on concluded that a person's physical condition can have an impact upon their future development. Due to physical deficits, some children repeatedly experience weakness and helplessness. Adler called this organ (as in organic) inferiorities. One way to adjust weakness was through *compensation* (making up for a weakness by developing strengths in other areas). Another way to adjust was through *overcompensation* (the conversion of a weakness into a strength). Adler later recognized that compensation and overcompensation could also be directed to psychological inferiorities. All humans begin life completely dependent upon others for survival and, therefore, experience feelings of inferiority. Such vulnerability may be further complicated by one's place in the *birth order* since comparisons to older, more able, siblings may further expand *inferiority feelings*—feelings that all humans try to escape by becoming powerful or superior (Pervin, 1989). Thus, "*to be a human being means the possession of a feeling of inferiority that is constantly pressing on towards its own conquest*" (Adler, 1938) p. 73). In the continuing struggle for security the person is impelled to conquer current reality in an effort to secure a better future, an "impulse toward upward development."

A Major Motive: Will to Power

Adler originally theorized that a major motive was *will to power* (the striving to feel strong and powerful in interacting with the world). One wants to avoid feelings of weakness or inferiority. Feelings of inferiority can motivate personal growth but they can also disable rather than motivate. Whether inferiority facilitates growth or disables a person is a matter of personal attitude. This can manifest in impaired personal adjustment or difficulty in personal relationships (Pervin, 1989). One may develop an *inferiority complex*—a condition of being overwhelmed by one's feelings of inferiority rather than being motivated toward success by those feelings.

The concept *will to power* was eventually abandoned in favor of *striving for superiority* (an upward drive leading to perfection, completion, and wholeness). With this transformation, organ inferiority was re-conceptualized. It referred to any feeling of weakness arising from incompletion or imperfection in any sphere of life. Associated with striving for superiority was the concept of *social feeling* and, when that fails, there is its opposite *mistaken lifestyle*—any lifestyle lacking sufficient social interest. The well-adjusted individual strives for superiority and wholeness in the environment while expressing a love for and communion with other people.

As an individual person, and after World War I, he developed socialist tendencies spurred by the famine and poverty in Austria. Between World War I and 1934 he promoted 31 systematic couples and family counseling/education centers in Europe. In 1922 he proposed that children should be prepared and educated for the community. From a community feeling and spirit would come the leaders of the future. In 1927, he established 22 child guidance clinics. Psychologists he believed had a responsibility to the welfare of society:

The honest psychologist cannot shut his eyes to social conditions which prevent the child from becoming a part of the community and from feeling at home in the world. And which allow him to grow up as though he lived in an enemy country. Thus the psychologist must work against nationalism when it is so poorly understood that it harms mankind as a whole; against wars of conquest, revenge and prestige; against unemployment which plunges people into hopelessness; and against all other obstacles which interfere with the spreading of social interest in the family, the school, and the society at large. (Adler, 1935, in Rudmin and Ansbacher, 1989)

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