

Interpersonal Approach to Personality by Alfred Adler

Authored by
mohammad looti

November 19, 2022

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Interpersonal Approach to Personality by Alfred Adler*.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=38510>



Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler (February 7, 1870 - May 28, 1937) was an Austrian medical doctor, psychotherapist, and founder of the school of individual psychology. In collaboration with Sigmund Freud and a small group of Freud's colleagues, Adler was among the co-founders of the psychoanalytic movement as a core member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. He was the first major figure to break away from psychoanalysis to form an independent school of psychotherapy and personality theory. This was after Freud declared Adler's ideas as too contrary, leading to an ultimatum to all members of the Society (which Freud had shepherded) to drop Adler or be expelled, disavowing the right to dissent (Makari, 2008). Following this split, Adler would come to have an enormous, independent effect on the disciplines of counseling and psychotherapy as they developed over the course of the 20th century (Ellenberger, 1970). He influenced notable figures in subsequent schools of psychotherapy such as Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, Abraham Maslow and Albert Ellis. His writings preceded, and were at times surprisingly consistent with, later neo-Freudian insights such as those evidenced in the works of Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan and Erich Fromm.

Adler emphasized the importance of equality in preventing various forms of psychopathology, and espoused the development of social interest and democratic family structures for raising children.

His most famous concept is the inferiority complex which speaks to the problem of self-esteem and its negative effects on human health (e.g. sometimes producing a paradoxical superiority striving). His emphasis on power dynamics is rooted in the philosophy of Nietzsche, whose works were published a few decades before Adler's. However, Adler's conceptualization of the Will to Power" focuses on the individual's creative power to change for the better. Adler argued for holism, viewing the individual holistically rather than reductively, the latter being the dominant lens for viewing human psychology. Adler was also among the first in psychology to argue in favor of feminism making the case that power dynamics between men and women (and associations with masculinity and femininity) are crucial to understanding human psychology (Connell, 1995). Adler is considered, along with Freud and Jung, to be one of the three founding figures of depth psychology, which emphasizes the unconscious and psychodynamics (Ellenberger, 1970; Ehrenwald, 1991).

Basic principles

Adler was influenced by the mental construct ideas of the philosopher Hans Vaihinger (The Philosophy of As If / Philosophie des Als Ob) and the literature of Dostoevsky. While still a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society he developed a theory of organic inferiority and compensation that was the prototype for his later turn to phenomenology and the development of his famous concept, the inferiority complex.

Adler was also influenced by the philosophies of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rudolf Virchow and the statesman Jan Smuts (who coined the term "holism"). Adler's School, known as "Individual Psychology"--an arcane reference to the Latin *individuum* meaning indivisibility, a term intended to emphasize holism--is both a social and community psychology as well as a depth psychology. Adler was an early advocate in psychology for prevention and emphasized the training of parents, teachers, social workers and so on in democratic approaches that allow a child to exercise their power through reasoned decision making whilst co-operating with others. He was a social idealist, and was known as a socialist in his early years of association with psychoanalysis (1902-1911). His allegiance to Marxism dissipated over time (he retained Marx's social idealism yet distanced himself from Marx's economic theories).

Adler was a very pragmatic man and believed that lay people could make practical use of the insights of psychology. He sought to construct a social movement united under the principles of "Gemeinschaftsgefühl" (community feeling) and social interest (the practical actions that are exercised for the social good). Adler was also an early supporter of feminism in psychology and the social world, believing that feelings of superiority and inferiority were often gendered and expressed symptomatically in characteristic masculine and feminine styles. These styles could form the basis of psychic compensation and lead to mental health difficulties. Adler also spoke of "safeguarding tendencies" and neurotic behavior long before Anna Freud wrote about the same

phenomena in her book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*.

Adlerian-based scholarly, clinical and social practices focus on the following topics:

Mental Health Prevention

Social Interest and Community Feeling

Holism and the Creative Self

Fictional Finalism, Teleology, and Goal constructs

Psychological and Social Encouragement

Inferiority, Superiority and Compensation

Life Style / Style of Life

Early Recollections (a projective technique)

Family Constellation and Birth Order

Life Tasks & Social Embeddedness

The Conscious and Unconscious realms

Private Logic & Common Sense (based in part on Kant's "sensus communis")

Symptoms and Neurosis

Safeguarding Behaviour

Guilt and Guilt Feelings

Socratic Questioning

Dream Interpretation

Child and Adolescent Psychology

Democratic approaches to Parenting and Families

Adlerian Approaches to Classroom Management

Leadership and Organisational Psychology

From its inception, Adlerian psychology has always included both professional and lay adherents. Indeed, Adler felt that all people could make use of the scientific insights garnered by psychology and he welcomed everyone, from decorated academics to those with no formal education to participate in spreading the principles of Adlerian psychology.

Adler's approach to personality

Adler's book, *Über den nervösen Charakter* (The Neurotic Character) defines his earlier key ideas. He argued that human personality could be explained teleologically, parts of the individual's unconscious self ideal work to convert feelings of inferiority to superiority (or rather completeness). The desires of the self ideal were countered by social and ethical demands. If the corrective factors were disregarded and the individual over-compensated, then an inferiority complex would occur, fostering the danger of the individual becoming egocentric, power-hungry and aggressive or worse. Common therapeutic tools include the use of humor, historical instances, and paradoxical

injunctions.

Psychodynamics and teleology

Adler maintained that human psychology is psychodynamic in nature, yet unlike Freud's metapsychology that emphasizes instinctual demands, human psychology is guided by goals and fueled by a yet unknown creative force. Like Freud's instincts, Adler's fictive goals are largely unconscious. These goals have a "teleological" function. Constructivist Adlerians, influenced by neo-Kantian and Nietzschean ideas, view these "teleological" goals as "fictions" in the sense that Hans Vaihinger spoke of (fictio). Usually there is a fictional final goal which can be deciphered alongside of innumerable sub-goals. The inferiority/superiority dynamic is constantly at work through various forms of compensation and over-compensation. For example, in anorexia nervosa the fictive final goal is to "be perfectly thin" (overcompensation on the basis of a feeling of inferiority). Hence, the fictive final goal can serve a persecutory function that is ever-present in subjectivity (though its trace springs are usually unconscious). The end goal of being "thin" is fictive however since it can never be subjectively achieved.

Teleology serves another vital function for Adlerians. Chilon's "hora telos" ("see the end, consider the consequences") provides for both healthy and maladaptive psychodynamics. Here we also find Adler's emphasis on personal responsibility in mentally healthy subjects who seek their own and the social good (Slavik & King, 2007).

Constructivism and metaphysics

The metaphysical thread of Adlerian theory does not problematise the notion of teleology since concepts such as eternity (an ungraspable end where time ceases to exist) match the religious aspects that are held in tandem. In contrast, the constructivist Adlerian threads (either humanist/modernist or postmodern in variant) seek to raise insight of the force of unconscious fictions- which carry all of the inevitability of 'fate'- so long as one does not understand them. Here, 'teleology' itself is fictive yet experienced as quite real. This aspect of Adler's theory is somewhat analogous to the principles developed in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive Therapy (CT). Both Albert Ellis and Aaron T. Beck credit Adler as a major precursor to REBT and CT. Ellis in particular was a member of the North American Society for Adlerian Psychology and served as an editorial board member for the Adlerian Journal Individual Psychology.

As a psychodynamic system, Adlerians excavate the past of a client/patient in order to alter their future and increase integration into community in the 'here-and-now'. The 'here-and-now' aspects are especially relevant to those Adlerians who emphasize humanism and/or existentialism in their approaches. It also changes the way of how we look at life.

Holism

Metaphysical Adlerians emphasise a spiritual holism in keeping with what Jan Smuts articulated (Smuts coined the term "holism"), that is, the spiritual sense of one-ness that holism usually implies (etymology of holism: from ὅλος holos, a Greek word meaning all, entire, total) Smuts believed that evolution involves a progressive series of lesser wholes integrating into larger ones. Whilst Smuts' text *Holism and Evolution* is thought to be a work of science, it actually attempts to unify evolution with a higher metaphysical principle (holism). The sense of connection and one-ness revered in various religious traditions (among these, Baha'i, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism) finds a strong complement in Adler's thought.

The pragmatic and materialist aspects to contextualizing members of communities, the construction of communities and the socio-historical-political forces that shape communities matter a great deal when it comes to understanding an individual's psychological make-up and functioning. This aspect of Adlerian psychology holds a high level of synergy with the field of community psychology. However, Adlerian psychology, unlike community psychology, is holistically concerned with both prevention and clinical treatment after-the-fact. Hence, Adler cannot be considered the "first community psychologist", a discourse that formalized in the decades following Adler's death (King & Shelley, 2008).

Adlerian psychology, Carl Jung's Analytical Psychology, Gestalt Therapy and Karen Horney's psychodynamic approach are holistic schools of psychology. These discourses eschew a reductive approach to understanding human psychology and psychopathology.

Typology

Adler (1956) developed a scheme of so-called personality types. These 'types' are to be taken as provisional or heuristic since he did not, in essence, believe in personality types. The danger with typology is to lose sight of the individual's uniqueness and to gaze reductively, acts that Adler opposed. Nevertheless, he intended to illustrate patterns that could denote a characteristic governed under the overall style of life. Hence American Adlerians such as Harold Mosak have made use of Adler's typology in this provisional sense:

The Getting or Leaning type are those who selfishly take without giving back. These people also tend to be antisocial and have low activity levels.

The Avoiding types are those that hate being defeated. They may be successful, but have not taken any risks getting there. They are likely to have low social contact in fear of rejection or defeat in any way.

The Ruling or Dominant type strive for power and are willing to manipulate situations and people, anything to get their way. People of this type are also prone to anti-social behavior.

The Socially Useful types are those who are very outgoing and very active. They have a lot of social contact and strive to make changes for the good.

These 'types' are typically formed in childhood and are expressions of the Style of Life.

On birth order

Adler often emphasized one's birth order as having an influence on the Style of Life and the strengths and weaknesses in one's psychological make up. Birth Order referred to the placement of siblings within the family. Adler believed that the firstborn child would be loved and nurtured by the family until the arrival of a second child. This second child would cause the first born to suffer feelings of dethronement, no longer being the center of attention. Adler (1908) believed that in a three-child family, the oldest child would be the most likely to suffer from neuroticism and substance addiction which he reasoned was a compensation for the feelings of excessive responsibility "the weight of the world on one's shoulders" (e.g. having to look after the younger ones) and the melancholic loss of that once supremely pampered position. As a result, he predicted that this child was the most likely to end up in jail or an asylum. Youngest children would tend to be overindulged, leading to poor social empathy. Consequently, the middle child, who would experience neither dethronement nor overindulgence, was most likely to develop into a successful individual yet also most likely to be a rebel and to feel squeezed-out. Adler himself was the second in a family of six children.

Adler never produced any scientific support for his interpretations on birth order roles. Yet the value of the hypothesis was to extend the importance of siblings in marking the psychology of the individual beyond Freud's more limited emphasis on the Mother and Father. Hence, Adlerians spend time therapeutically mapping the influence that siblings (or lack thereof) had on the psychology of their clients. The idiographic approach entails an excavation of the phenomenology of one's birth order position for likely influence on the subject's Style of Life. In sum, the subjective experiences of sibling positionality and inter-relations are psychodynamically important for Adlerian therapists and personality theorists, not the cookbook predictions that may or may not have been objectively true in Adler's time.

On homosexuality

Adler's ideas regarding non-heterosexual sexuality and various social forms of deviance have long been controversial. Along with prostitution and criminality, Adler had classified 'homosexuals' as falling among the "failures of life". In 1917, he began his writings on homosexuality with a 52-page brochure, and sporadically published more thoughts throughout the rest of his life.

The Dutch psychiatrist Gerard J. M. van den Aardweg underlines how Alfred Adler came to his

conclusions for, in 1917, Adler believed that he had established a connection between homosexuality and an inferiority complex towards one's own gender. This point of view differed from Freud's theory that homosexuality is rooted in narcissism or Jung's view of inappropriate expressions of contrasexuality vis-à-vis the archetypes of the Anima and Animus.

There is evidence that Adler may have moved towards abandoning the hypothesis. Towards the end of Adler's life, in the mid 1930s, his opinion towards homosexuality began to shift. Elizabeth H. McDowell, a New York state family social worker recalls undertaking supervision with Adler on a young man who was "living in sin" with an older man in New York City. Adler asked her, "Is he happy, would you say?" "Oh yes," McDowell replied. Adler then stated, Well, why don't we leave him alone." On reflection, McDowell found this comment to contain "profound wisdom", but there must be some misunderstanding on Adler's answer. Adler was offering his help only to those who were asking for it in person. His therapy process could be applied only to those who felt themselves in a deadlock, fallen "at the bottom of a well", and looking for help to get out. Homosexuality was considered one of the most difficult cases, needing long experience on the part of the psychotherapist and many consequent sessions and much personal work by the individual, depending on the "maturity" of the problem. Success could not be guaranteed.

According to Phyllis Bottome, who wrote Adler's Biography (after Adler himself laid upon her that task): "Homosexuality he always treated as lack of courage. These were but ways of obtaining a slight release for a physical need while avoiding a greater obligation. A transient partner of your own sex is a better known road and requires less courage than a permanent contact with an "unknown" sex. Adler taught that men cannot be judged from within by their "possessions," as he used to call nerves, glands, traumas, drives et cetera, since both judge and prisoner are liable to misconstrue what is invisible and incalculable; but that he can be judged, with no danger from introspection, by how he measures up to the three common life tasks set before every human being between the cradle and the grave. Work or employment, love or marriage, social contact."

Parent education

Adler emphasized both treatment and prevention. As a psychodynamic psychology, Adlerians emphasize the foundational importance of childhood in developing personality and any tendency towards various forms of psychopathology. The best way to inoculate against what are now termed "personality disorders" (what Adler had called the "neurotic character"), or a tendency to various neurotic conditions (depression, anxiety, etc.), is to train a child to be and feel an equal part of the family. This entails developing a democratic character and the ability to exercise power reasonably rather than through compensation. Hence Adler proselytized against corporal punishment and cautioned parents to refrain from the twin evils of pampering and neglect. The responsibility to the optimal development of the child is not limited to the Mother or Father but to teachers and society more broadly. Adler argued therefore that teachers, nurses, social workers, and so on require

training in parent education in order to complement the work of the family in fostering a democratic character. When a child does not feel equal and is enacted upon (abused through pampering or neglect) they are likely to develop inferiority or superiority complexes and various accompanying compensation strategies. These strategies exact a social toll by seeding higher divorce rates, the breakdown of the family, criminal tendencies, and subjective suffering in the various guises of psychopathology. Adlerians have long promoted parent education groups, especially those influenced by the famous Austrian/American Adlerian Rudolf Dreikurs (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964).

Spirituality, ecology and community

In a late work, *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind* (1938), Adler turns to the subject of metaphysics, where he integrates Jan Smuts' evolutionary holism with the ideas of teleology and community: "sub specie aeternitatus". Unabashedly, he argues his vision of society: "Social feeling means above all a struggle for a communal form that must be thought of as eternally applicable... when humanity has attained its goal of perfection... an ideal society amongst all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of evolution." Adler follows this pronouncement with a defense of metaphysics:

"I see no reason to be afraid of metaphysics; it has had a great influence on human life and development. We are not blessed with the possession of absolute truth; on that account we are compelled to form theories for ourselves about our future, about the results of our actions, etc. Our idea of social feeling as the final form of humanity - of an imagined state in which all the problems of life are solved and all our relations to the external world rightly adjusted - is a regulative ideal, a goal that gives our direction. This goal of perfection must bear within it the goal of an ideal community, because all that we value in life, all that endures and continues to endure, is eternally the product of this social feeling."

This social feeling for Adler is *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, a community feeling whereby one feels he or she belongs with others and has also developed an ecological connection with nature (plants, animals, the crust of this earth) and the cosmos as a whole, sub specie aeternitatus. Clearly, Adler himself had little problem with adopting a metaphysical and spiritual point of view to support his theories. Yet his overall theoretical yield provides ample room for the dialectical humanist (modernist) and separately the postmodernist to explain the significance of community and ecology through differing lenses (even if Adlerians have not fully considered how deeply divisive and contradictory these three threads of metaphysics, modernism, and post modernism are).