

Superiority Complex

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Superiority complex refers to an exaggerated feeling of being superior to others.

Background and Adler's childhood

The term was coined by Alfred Adler (February 7, 1870 - May 28, 1937), as part of his School of Individual psychology. It was introduced in his series of books, including "Understanding Human Nature" and "Social Interest".

Adler's childhood may shed significant light on how his theory of the superiority complex came about. Overcoming his personal feeling of inferiority, Adler was able to direct and shape his own unique destiny. Alfred Adler was a sickly child with striving, healthy siblings. Adler thought himself "ugly and too small" and was in constant competition with his older brother. Pampered by his mother because of his sickness, Adler was dethroned when his mother's affections turned to his younger brother. Feeling abandoned by his mother, Adler sought solace from his father--who had very high expectations of Alfred.

Despite Adler's childhood adversities (which included being hit by a car twice) through determination and very hard work he graduated from college and became a doctor. He then went on to study with Freud, becoming the president of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society. Madly driven and highly motivated, Adler defected from Freud and founded the Society for Free Psychoanalytic Research, taking near a third of Freud's followers with him.

Adler moved to New York in 1929, and with his warmth, intense drive and optimism, became America's first popular psychologist. A historical view of Adler's superiority complex sheds light on how his childhood situation shaped his theories on the subject, using himself as a subject of study.

Adler and striving for superiority

Adler's view of striving for superiority is the urge for people to strive toward perfection. Adler described his notion of striving for superiority as the fundamental fact of life. He feels that everyone has a driven force to succeed and overcome imperfections. Adler believes that everyone experiences feelings of inferiority. These inferiorities start early on in our lives as small, weak and powerless children that are surrounded by larger and powerful adults. These feelings of inferiority occur from our personal limitations and may result in our struggle for superiority. According to Adler, the core of each person's style of life or (personality pattern), "the pattern of personality and behavior that defines the pathway each person takes through life", is formed by the age of 5. Striving for superiority is not an attempt to be better than everyone else, nor is it an arrogant or domineering tendency or an inflated opinion of our abilities and accomplishments. What Adler meant was a drive for perfection (See Perfection). Thus, Adler suggested that we strive for superiority in an effort to perfect ourselves, to make ourselves complete or whole.

Later on in life, Adler began to emphasize the existence of a creative self. He meant that humans create their own personalities through choices and experiences.

Adlerian definition

We should not be astonished if in the cases where we see an inferiority complex we find a superiority complex more or less hidden. On the other hand, if we inquire into a superiority complex and study its continuity, we can always find a more or less hidden inferiority complex."

"If a person is a show-off it is only because he feels inferior, because he does not feel strong enough to compete with others on the useful side of life. That is why he stays on the useless side. He is not in harmony with society. It seems to be a trait of human nature that when individuals - both children and adults - feel weak, they want to solve the problems of life in such a way as to obtain personal superiority without any admixture of social interest. A superiority complex is a second phase. It is a compensation for the inferiority complex."

"The superiority complex is one of the ways which a person with an inferiority complex may use as a method of escape from his difficulties. He assumes that he is superior when he is not, and this false success compensates him for the state of inferiority which he cannot bear. The normal person does not have a superiority complex, he does not even have a sense of superiority. He has the striving to be superior in the sense that we all have ambition to be successful; but so long as this striving is expressed in work it does not lead to false valuations, which are at the root of mental disease."

Other perspectives

Other authors have argued that it is a mistake to believe that both the superiority and inferiority complex can be found together as different expressions of the same pathology and that both complexes can exist within the same individual since an individual with a superiority complex truly believes they are superior to others. An inferiority complex may manifest with the behaviors that are intended to show others that one is superior; such as expensive material possessions, or an obsession with vanity and appearances. They express themselves as superior because they lack feelings of adequacy. Superiority complex sufferers do not care about image or vanity, they have innate feelings of superiority and thus do not concern themselves with proving their superiority to others. The term "superiority complex", in everyday usage, refers to an overly high opinion of oneself. In psychology, it refers to the unrealistic and exaggerated belief that one is better than others. In contrast, inferiority complex sufferers mimic this as a way to compensate for unconscious feelings of low self-esteem or inadequacy.

Those exhibiting the superiority complex have a self-image of supremacy. Those with superiority

complexes may garner a negative image in those around them, as they are not concerned with the opinions of others about themselves. This is responsible for the paradox in which those with an inferiority complex are the ones who present themselves in the best light possible; while those with a superiority complex may not attempt to make themselves look good. This may give off an image that others may consider inferior. This is responsible for the misconception that those with an inferiority complex are meek and mild, but the complex is not defined by the behavior of the individual but by the self-image of the individual. Not that a person with a superiority complex will not express their superiority to others, only that they do not feel the need to do so. They may speak as if they are all-knowing and better than others. But ultimately they do not care if others think so or not, and will not care if others tell them so. They simply won't listen to, and don't care about, those who disagree. In this regard, it is much alike the cognitive bias known as Illusory superiority. This is juxtaposed to an inferiority complex where if their knowledge, accuracy, superiority or etc. is challenged, the individual will not stop in their attempts to prove such things until the dissenting party accepts their opinion (or whatever issue it may be). Again this is another reason that those with inferiority complexes are often mistaken for having superiority complexes when they must express and maintain their superiority in the eyes of others. Many fail to recognize that this is a trait of low self-opinion who care deeply about the opinion of others, not of those who feel superior and have high-self esteem and do not care at all about the opinion of others.

Behaviors related to this in a superiority complex may include an exaggerated opinion of one's worth and abilities, unrealistically high expectations in goals and achievements for oneself and others, persistent attempts to correct others (regardless of whether or not they are actually correct), a tendency to discredit others' opinions and over-forcefulness aimed at dominating those considered as weaker or less important. While behaviors related to this in an inferiority complex may include exaggeration of one's worth and abilities to others, vanity, extravagant dressing (intent on drawing attention), excessive need for competition, pride, over-sentimentality and affected exaltation, snobbishness, a tendency to discredit others' opinions and over-forcefulness aimed at dominating those who threaten their image of superiority. In both cases the conscious awareness of one's delusion typically results in a temporal phenomenon called cognitive dissonance, which may or may not serve the purpose of bringing that person back "down to earth".

Adler: Will to Power

Alfred Adler borrowed heavily from Nietzsche's work to develop his second Viennese school of psychotherapy called individual psychology. Adler (1912) wrote in his important book *Über den nervösen Charakter* (The Neurotic Constitution):

Nietzsche's "Will to power" and "Will to seem" embrace many of our views, which again resemble in some respects the views of Féré and the older writers, according to whom the sensation of pleasure originates in a feeling of power, that of pain in a feeling of feebleness (Ohnmacht).

Adler's adaptation of the will to power was and still is in contrast to Sigmund Freud's pleasure principle or the "will to pleasure", and to Viktor Frankl's logotherapy or the "will to meaning". Adler's intent was to build a movement that would rival, even supplant, others in psychology by arguing for the holistic integrity of psychological well-being with that of social equality. His interpretation of Nietzsche's will to power was concerned with the individual patient's overcoming of the superiority-inferiority dynamic.

In Man's Search for Meaning, Frankl compared his third Viennese school of psychotherapy with Adler's psychoanalytic interpretation of the will to power:

... the striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a will to meaning in contrast to the pleasure principle (or, as we could also term it, the will to pleasure) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the will to power stressed by Adlerian psychology.

--Viktor E. Frankl, M.D., Ph.D.