

ADLER, ALFRED

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Alfred Adler

Born: 1870 | **Died:** 1937

Nationality: Austrian

Primary Field(s): Psychiatry, Individual Psychology, Psychoanalysis

1. Summary

Alfred Adler was a groundbreaking Austrian physician, psychiatrist, and psychotherapist who established the school of psychology known as Individual Psychology. Initially trained in medicine at the University of Vienna, Adler began his career closely associated with Sigmund Freud and the nascent psychoanalytic movement, quickly becoming one of Freud's earliest and most prominent associates, serving as the first president of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. However, Adler's theoretical divergences concerning the primacy of sexual drives and the role of the unconscious led to a monumental break, marking him as the very first significant student to separate from Freud's doctrinaire methods and establish his own distinct system of thought. This separation was rooted in Adler's fundamental belief that human behavior is primarily influenced by conscious, goal-directed striving for significance and belonging, a concept diametrically opposed to Freud's deterministic emphasis on instinctual drives.

Adler's theoretical framework posited that individuals are fundamentally driven by an inherent desire to overcome feelings of inferiority--a universal experience that begins in childhood--and to strive for superiority, perfection, or completion. This striving, coupled with a deep-seated need for social connection, forms the bedrock of his psychological model. He shifted the focus of psychological analysis from purely internal, intrapsychic conflict to the individual's interaction with the social environment, emphasizing concepts such as the **social interest** (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), the unity of the personality (the indivisible self, hence "Individual Psychology"), and the guiding role of fictional final goals (teleology). His influence extended far beyond clinical practice, impacting areas such as education, counseling, and social work, solidifying his place as one of the three foundational figures in depth psychology, alongside Freud and Jung.

2. Early Life and Motivation

Alfred Adler's own formative experiences played a crucial role in shaping his subsequent psychological theories, particularly his emphasis on overcoming physical limitations and striving for competence. Born in 1870 near Vienna, Adler's early life was marked by significant physical frailty and illness. He suffered severely from ricketts, which rendered him unable to walk until the age of four, followed by a near-fatal bout of pneumonia. These traumatic experiences of helplessness and proximity to death instilled in him a profound motivation to surpass his physical limitations and dedicate himself to the healing arts.

The source content highlights that Adler actually became a doctor directly due to his own horrific experiences with rickets and pneumonia that nearly killed him as a child. This firsthand understanding of vulnerability and the intense drive to compensate for perceived weakness directly informed his cornerstone concept of the **inferiority feeling** and the subsequent **striving for superiority**. Adler observed that feelings of inadequacy are not pathological but are the normal stimuli for all human improvement and cultural advancement. His personal journey from a sickly child to a respected physician and pioneering psychiatrist exemplifies the very compensatory mechanisms that he later formalized into his theoretical structure.

3. Break with Psychoanalysis and Individual Psychology

Adler's career began in the orbit of Sigmund Freud; he was instrumental in the early days of the psychoanalytic movement. However, fundamental theoretical schisms soon emerged. Freud maintained that behavior was largely determined by unconscious, primarily sexual, infantile drives, whereas Adler increasingly advocated for a psychology centered on conscious choice, societal belonging, and the future-oriented pursuit of goals. Adler viewed the person as an integrated, indivisible whole operating within a social context, a view that sharply contradicted Freud's model of a psyche divided into id, ego, and superego, perpetually at war.

The official rupture occurred in 1911 when Adler resigned as president of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society and, along with several followers, established the Society for Free Psychoanalytic Research, which was soon renamed the Society for Individual Psychology. This break was philosophical and methodological, asserting that psychological problems stem not from repressed sexuality but from mistaken goals and faulty lifestyle choices driven by a failure to develop sufficient social interest. Adler argued that the individual is influenced by a conscious pressure to express and satisfy themselves, focusing on the individual's creative power to interpret experiences and move toward self-defined objectives, a perspective fundamentally different from the deterministic view held by classical psychoanalysis.

4. Core Tenets of Individual Psychology

Individual Psychology is built upon several interconnected principles that prioritize holism, social embeddedness, and teleology (the study of final causes or goals). The first major tenet is the unity and self-consistency of the personality, asserting that every psychological manifestation--thoughts, feelings, actions--is part of a single, coherent **lifestyle** directed toward a self-chosen, often unconscious, fictional goal. This lifestyle is established early in life, typically by the age of five, as the child attempts to compensate for perceived inferiorities.

A second central tenet is the necessity of understanding the individual within their social context. Adler asserted that human beings are fundamentally social creatures, and all psychological

problems are, at their root, problems of social interaction. This led to his concept of **social interest** (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), which he considered the ultimate criterion of mental health. Social interest is defined as the capacity to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, and to feel with the heart of another. It represents the innate potential to cooperate with others for the common good, moving beyond selfish striving. When social interest is underdeveloped, neuroses and faulty lifestyles manifest, as the individual's striving for significance becomes self-centered or destructive to the community.

Finally, Individual Psychology is distinctly teleological. Unlike causal theories that seek the origin of behavior in past events (like childhood trauma), Adler focused on the future goal toward which the person is striving. Behavior is best understood by its purpose, not its cause. The individual operates by a **fictional finalism**--an imagined central goal (e.g., "I must always be right," or "I must be the most powerful") that guides all movements and choices. Therapy, therefore, involves helping the client recognize these self-made fictional goals and replace dysfunctional, self-serving ones with goals that align with social interest.

5. Key Concepts

Inferiority Complex and Striving for Superiority: The **inferiority feeling** is the normal state of all human beings, stemming from dependence and incompleteness during childhood. The **inferiority complex** is the pathological form, occurring when the person is overwhelmed by these feelings and ceases striving constructively. The subsequent striving for superiority (or perfection) is the dynamic force behind all motivation, aiming for competence and mastery.

Social Interest (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*): A measure of psychological health reflecting an individual's orientation toward the welfare of others and the community. It involves empathy, cooperation, and the realization that personal fulfillment is inextricably linked to the well-being of society.

Lifestyle (Style of Life): The unified, characteristic way an individual attempts to meet life's challenges, reflecting their unique pattern of striving, interpretation of experience, and reaction to feelings of inferiority. It is the filter through which all experiences are processed and includes the person's private logic.

Birth Order and Sibling Rivalry: Adler was a pioneer in studying the psychological effects of family configuration, particularly the position of the child among siblings (e.g., first-born, middle, youngest). He argued that birth order significantly influences the challenges a child faces and the compensatory mechanisms they develop, thus shaping the early formation of their lifestyle.

6. Intellectual Context and Influence

Adler's work was heavily influenced by philosophers like Hans Vaihinger, whose philosophy of "as if" helped shape Adler's concept of fictional finalism--the idea that people organize their lives around goals that may not be objectively real but function as guiding fictions. Furthermore, his emphasis on social and societal forces places him within a tradition that seeks to integrate psychology with sociology and community concerns, rather than isolating it within the medical or biological domain.

Adler's influence on subsequent psychological thought is profound, though often unrecognized, largely because many of his key concepts (such as the inferiority complex and lifestyle) have been absorbed into common parlance and integrated into other therapeutic systems without explicit attribution. He deeply influenced humanistic psychology, particularly the work of Abraham Maslow, who credited Adler with providing a foundational understanding of striving toward self-actualization. Additionally, his focus on goal-setting, personal responsibility, and the subjective interpretation of reality laid the groundwork for many cognitive-behavioral and existential therapies. His work also had a significant impact on education, resulting in the development of Adlerian parenting models and classroom management techniques that emphasize encouragement, natural consequences, and democratic family structures.

7. Major Works

The Neurotic Constitution: Outlines of a Comparative Individualistic Psychology and Psychotherapy (1912)

Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology (1927)

Understanding Human Nature (1927)

What Life Should Mean to You (1931)

Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind (1938)

8. Criticisms and Debates

While highly influential, Adlerian psychology has faced several criticisms. One major critique, often lodged by orthodox Freudians, centers on Adler's rejection of the deep unconscious and his perceived simplification of the personality structure. Critics argued that by focusing primarily on conscious striving and social goals, Adler failed to adequately account for the intensity and complexity of instinctual, repressed drives and their role in psychopathology. Furthermore, some find his core concepts, particularly **social interest**, to be somewhat abstract and moralistic, making

them difficult to operationalize and measure scientifically compared to more empirically grounded models.

Another enduring debate concerns the holistic nature of Individual Psychology. While Adler viewed the unity of the personality as its greatest strength, critics suggest that his expansive focus--encompassing everything from medical history and birth order to social ethics--makes the theory overly broad and less precise in clinical application than more narrowly defined models. Despite these debates, the utility of Adler's concepts, such as the inferiority complex and the emphasis on early recollections and family dynamics, remains central to modern counseling and psychotherapy, ensuring his continuing legacy as a pragmatic and human-centered theorist.

Further Reading

[Alfred Adler \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Individual Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Sigmund Freud \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[University of Vienna \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Rickets \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Hans Vaihinger \(Wikipedia\)](#)