



# THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Tony Williams

**Adler called his theory 'Individual Psychology' partly to distinguish it from Freudian psychoanalysis. Like Freud, Adler had a model of the human personality on which his practice of therapy was based. This was evolved over a working life.**

Teleology is the essence of Adler's Individual Psychology. The basic concept of goals is the key concept to all Adler's thinking. He interpreted the human personality as always striving towards a goal, which could be a realistic goal for the healthy individual, but might be an unrealistic or mistaken goal in the case of the individual with problems, or the 'neurotic individual'. So his theory of the human personality is always looking towards the future, rather than being focused on the past, looking towards the aims and goals of the individual when trying to find what makes him/her tick. In his view, human beings constantly move towards goals, whether or not they are aware of this. It is interesting that he is popular in the USA, where the orientation is perhaps more towards the future, while Europe looks more towards the past. In contrast to Freud, he had an early huge publishing success in the USA.

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Adler broke down the way in which our striving towards a goal actually works into the idea of inferiority feelings (which have been popularized as the inferiority complex) and the striving for superiority. The idea of inferiority feelings can have quite a specific application, and be related to what Adler called 'organ inferiority'. This involves someone having a feeling of inferiority because of a specific handicap, like deafness, a stammer, etc. People with organ inferiority will try to compensate for their perceived inferiority so that they can fit into society. An example of over compensation would be the man with weak legs who chooses the career of a runner or acrobat.

However, as Adler developed his ideas, he came to think that feelings of inferiority were universal to all people, and not just felt by someone who had a specific weakness. For example, all children feel smaller and weaker than adults, and we can feel our inferiority in relation to the huge events of nature, or even a tall tree. We cannot overcome death, even if we are healthy, and this can cause a feeling of inferiority. (We can see links with the existential school here.) It is possible to move from these almost universal feelings of inferiority into a neurotic or psychotic private world. Inferiority feelings can be overcome by a perceptive scheme of thinking or 'private logic' which is so removed from reality or common sense that it becomes harmful for the individual, the family and the community. However, the dynamic of inferiority feelings and striving for superiority that go with them *is* a universal one and the sense of inferiority and the striving against it is the impetus on which all great things are carried through, personal, communal or national. Thus, although inferiority feelings are negative, they can have positive results.

These feelings of inferiority lead all people to what Adler called a 'striving for superiority'. Their feelings of inferiority create the goal or aim of equality or superiority with other human beings, what Adler called 'moving from a felt minus to a felt plus.' As I said before, for the healthy individual these goals are realistic and can be achieved, but for the neurotic individual, feelings of inferiority will lead to the development of unrealistic and

unrealizable goals, or unhealthy goals. The neurotic individual will develop these goals through 'private logic', that is, a private system of ideas which doesn't correspond to reality. These 'mistaken notions' will lead the individual further and further away from reality and 'common sense' and may cause breakdown. For example, if a brother sees a sibling die during childhood, he may develop the realistic and healthy goal of wanting to be a doctor to fight and overcome disease. (Something like this was the case for Adler himself.) Another brother or sister might say to themselves 'the world is a dangerous place, full of diseases, so with the goal of staying healthy I will always stay indoors all the time'.

## Adler and Freud

Adler joined Freud's psychoanalytic circle in 1902, and initially they thought a great deal of each other. Adler was interested in Freud's psychoanalysis and theory of the Oedipus Complex, and Freud welcomed Adler's ideas about organ inferiority. But Freud wanted to subsume Adler's theory into his own, and make inferiority feelings an aspect of infantile sexuality. Adler, while not underestimating the importance of sexual feelings, didn't want to make his whole interpretation of the human personality hinge on the sex drive as Freud did. He wanted to see the human being as part of society, and his theory of inferiority feelings and the striving for superiority was a way of seeing how the individual related to the society

around him. For example, Adler had a lot to say about child development and education, and also was a feminist. The feminism was partly the result of the influence of his Russian wife Raissa, and with Raissa Adler met Trotsky. (He is also credited with the approval of Einstein, and briefly treated Nijinsky). Adler saw the relevance of inferiority feelings in relation to gender, and was sensitive to the whole movement towards striving to gain equality for women. To do Adler justice, as well as his theory of inferiority feelings etc, he really tried to see human beings as a whole, and as part of society, which links him to the humanistic school.

## Adlerian therapy

The Adlerian therapist would see the client as an equal being, and would respect their own views about themselves and the world. (Once again we see here Adler's pre-figuring of the humanistic school of therapy.) They would work with the client to uncover their feelings of inferiority and the private logic or mistaken notions that these feelings have generated. They would do this partly by inviting the client to remember very early experiences (early recollections) as a key to discovering how they see the world. Through these early recollections and through observing the phenomena which the client presents, including their interaction with the therapist, the mistaken notions would be uncovered and the therapist would help to guide the client away from these notions to a point where they could replace mistaken goals with common sense and

realistic goals. Part of the process of doing this involves 'encouragement', a key word in Adlerian therapy. Many clients are severely discouraged people who have had a lot of discouragement as part of early and later life, and part of the task of the therapist or counsellor is to replace this with a lot of encouragement, focusing on the client's positive attributes and potential. Part of the client's recovery will involve the development of what Adler called 'social interest' or *gemeinschaftsgefühl*, that is, an individual's interest in the social world around him or herself, and motivation to make some sort of contribution to that world and develop positive relationships. He believed in guiding the client towards taking responsibility for their lives, and working towards positive change.

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## Adler's influence

In his emphasis on 'rearranging' the thinking of the individual, Adler has been an influence of cognitive schools of therapy. We have already mentioned a relation to existential therapy, which is also born out by his emphasis on the phenomena taking place between client and therapist. He also fed into the neo- and post-Freudian schools, and has influenced Winnicott. Henri Ellenberger suggests that Adlerian psychology has fed into many different orientations without credit being ascribed to Adler.

## Lifestyle and the creative self

Lifestyle is a word coined by Adler, and for him indicates the unique 'fingerprint' or signature of someone's style of life, which involves attitudes, feelings, everything that makes the individual an individual. The pattern of lifestyle is set by the time the person is six or seven years of age, and its roots can be discovered by exploring a person's early recollections. We are from birth subject to the vicissitudes of life and prone to inferiority feelings, yet we have a unique way of responding to this life situation. Like an artist who has a uniquely individual style, we will all set our seal upon the world in a special and individual way. We often suffer from feelings of inadequacy, of 'less than-ness' but from the moment of birth to death we are in a sense all striving to achieve our own personal perfection. In Adler's later

writing this view is developed into the notion of the 'creative self'.

'The unitary, consistent, creative self is sovereign in the personality structure... It is something that intervenes between the stimuli acting upon the person and the responses the person makes to these stimuli. In essence, the doctrine of a creative self asserts that human beings make their own personalities...'

**T**he creative self is the yeast that acts upon the facts of the world and transforms these facts into a personality that is subjective, dynamic, unified, personal and uniquely stylized. The creative self gives meaning to life; it creates the goal as well as the means to the goal. The creative self is the active principle of human life, and is not unlike the older concept of the soul.

'In summary, it may be said that Adler fashioned a humanistic theory of personality that was the antithesis of Freud's conception of the individual. By endowing humans with altruism, humanitarianism, cooperation, creativity, uniqueness and awareness, Adler restored to humans a sense of dignity and worth that psychoanalysis had pretty largely destroyed. In place of the dreary materialistic picture that horrified and repelled so many readers of Freud, Adler offered a portrait of humans that was more satisfying, more hopeful, and far more complimentary to humans. Adler's conception of the nature of personality coincided with the ... idea that individuals can be the masters and not the victims of their fate. '(Calvin Hall and Gardner Lindzey's 'Theories of Personality').

**S**o the creative self has the personality constantly moving forward and creating itself, full of potential. Individuals have the power to change themselves, make choices and take responsibility. These developments of Adler's thought have probably contributed towards the development of humanistic psychology, while his theories about the nature of inferiority feelings, the striving towards superiority or equality and the development of goals have offered a way of interpreting human beings through their goals and strivings, in terms of their future as well as their past. My own practice as a therapist follows Adlerian principles and has this forward-looking emphasis, which I have also found to be of importance in my own assessment of myself and my life, as has Adler's emphasis on social interest. Adler synthesizes the two themes of the directive element, while at other times allowing self or client to be themselves and develop in the spirit of the creative self. 'Encouragement' has been a call to courage for myself and my clients.

### Further Reading

Adler, Alfred. *What Life could mean To You*. Oneworld Oxford.

Ellenberger, Henri F. *The Discovery of the Unconscious*. Fontana Press 1994.

Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey *Theories of Personality* Third Edition. John Wiley & Sons. New York.