The Sociocultural Paradigm: Alfred Adler

Theories of Personality
Spring 2012

Who is Alfred Adler?

- Biographical Sketch
  - Born February 7, 1870 in Austria
  - As a child, he was sickly, suffered from rickets, and didn’t walk until age 4
  - He almost died of pneumonia at age 5
  - He had a genuine love for people
  - Medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1895
  - Married 1897
  - Died May 28, 1937

Organ Inferiority and Compensation

- Adler’s Individual Psychology
  - Very different from Freud’s theory!
  - Stresses the uniqueness of each person as he or she struggles to overcome feelings of inferiority
  - Views the mind as an integrated whole working to help attain the future goals of the individual
  - Social variables are important in personality development
  - Concerned with the meaning of human existence (similar to existential view)
  - Concerned with positive relationships among humans (similar to humanistic view)

- Adler’s early position
  - Biological deficiencies inhibit a person from functioning normally in a given environment (stress)
  - Also makes them more vulnerable to disease

  - Person must *compensate* for weak organs
    - By concentrating on its development
      - Example: Vision therapy
    - By emphasizing other functions
      - Example: A blind person concentrating on developing auditory skills
  
  - Some people *overcompensate:*
    - Convert a biological weakness into a strength
      - Example: A physically frail child becomes an athlete
      - Example: Low intelligence becomes highly respected intellectual

  - Later (1910), Adler shifted his theoretical focus from physical inferiority to a subjective sense of inferiority or feelings of inferiority
  
  - He emphasized that all humans start life with a sense of inferiority due to dependence on parents

  - Due mainly to cultural conditions, he equated strength with masculinity, weakness with femininity
    - Masculine protest: Striving to become more masculine (powerful)
    - Feminine protest occurs in cultures where power is associated with females

Feelings of Inferiority
The Inferiority Complex

- Inferiority can motivate or mentally cripple in a state of neurosis
- Overwhelming inferiority may inhibit goal attainment
- Inferiority complex sufferers may:
  - be generally inhibited
  - try to compensate by dominating others instead of striving toward personal superiority

Feelings of Inferiority

- Feelings of inferiority are the primary motivational force behind all accomplishments
  - Inferiority Complex: When feelings of inferiority act as barriers to accomplishment

Striving for Superiority

- Later emphasis on striving for social/cultural superiority
  - Healthy adults seek a perfect or superior society rather than seeking power
- Striving for superiority is the fundamental fact of life
  - Superiority complex: Individual striving greater than social striving
    - When a person concentrates too much on developing his or her own superiority while ignoring the needs of others and of society

Vaihinger’s Philosophy of “As If”

- We can only be certain of sensations
- We invent meaning for sensations (through language, laws, theories for example)
- Such inventions (fictions) are useful and make civilized life, science, and communication possible
- Ultimately, we don’t live the lives we experience, we live the lives we create or our fictional lives
- Fiction is not meant in a negative

Fictional Goals and Lifestyles

- Adler applied Vaihinger’s philosophy to individual lives
- Subjective reality (perceptions) more important than objective reality
- Subjective reality is the most important determinant of behavior
- It is a child’s perceptions that determines his or her worldview
- Worldview\(^1\) helps develop fictional finalism\(^2\) (final goal) and lifestyle\(^3\)
- Fictional finalism – humans typically develop beliefs and then act “as if” those beliefs are true

Fictional Goals and Lifestyles

- The concept of fictional finalism gave Adler’s theory a teleological (future oriented) component
- Healthy people change their fictions when circumstances warrant it
- Neurotic people treat fictional life plan as reality
  - They tend to cling to their fictions at all costs
What is your fictional final goal?

- What is it that you value most highly?
- What is it that you see yourself striving for?
- What would be the most optimal future for you?

*Analysis:* Is there consistency between your answers and the way you're living, your beliefs, your choices, your actions?

Social Interest

- Gemeinschaftsgefühl (pronounced ga-MINE-scofts-ga-full):
  - *noun* Literally, “community feeling” or “social interest,” this term is used by Adlerian psychologists to describe the state of social connectedness and interest in the well-being of others that characterizes psychological health.
- *Social Interest:* An innate need to live in harmony and friendship with others and to aspire toward development of the perfect society
- We inherit the potential for social interest
- Those without well developed social interest are doomed to a neurotic lifestyle

Social Interest Continued

Three major problems in life include:
- Occupational tasks
- Societal tasks
- Love and marriage tasks

*Mistaken Lifestyles:* unfortunate lives not aimed at socially useful goals, like those with inferiority or superiority complexes

As such, social interest is the “index of normality”

Adler’s Four Types of People Determined by Degree of Social Interest

- *Ruling–dominant type:* attempts to dominate other people
- *Getting–learning type:* expects and receives from others
- *Avoiding type:* avoids life’s problems, never failing by never attempting anything
- *Socially useful type:* solves problems in a socially useful way

Three Childhood Conditions Leading to False Lifestyles

- *Physical inferiority:* may lead negatively to the inferiority complex
- *Spoiling and pampering:* may lead to selfishness and lack of social interest (the most serious parenting error, according to Adler)
- *Neglecting:* may lead to feelings of worthlessness, anger or distrust

The Creative Self

- This concept is considered by many as the crowning achievement of Adler’s theory
- Each person is free to act on genetic and environmental influences
  - Individuals are not simply passive recipients of these influences!
- Personality is part *nature*, part *nurture*, and part “*you*” (unique and responsible)
- Therefore, the personality is *self-created*
- *Individuals have choices*
Safeguarding Strategies

- Strategies used only by self-centered neurotics to deal with life issues and stresses
- Neurotics lack social interest and know it
- They use safeguarding to protect the small amount of esteem they do have
- They can be conscious or unconscious

First Safeguarding Strategy: *Excuses*

- Symptoms are used as excuses
- The neurotic blames his or her shortcomings on extenuating circumstances
- "Yes, but..." and "If only..."

Second Safeguarding Strategy: *Aggression*

- Using aggression to protect their already exaggerated sense of superiority in one of three forms:
  1. *Depreciation*: overvaluing one’s own achievements and undervaluing others
     - *Idealization*: judging people with standards so high that no real person can live up to them
     - *Solicitude*: people are treated as if they are incapable of taking care of themselves
  2. *Accusation*: blaming others for one’s faults (and seeking revenge against them)
  3. *Self-accusation*: “cursing oneself, reproaching oneself, self-torture and suicide” [also serves as an attention seeking mechanism]

Third Safeguarding Strategy: *Distancing*

- Sparing the psyche anxiety by distancing from life’s problems
  - Moving backwards
  - Standing still
  - Hesitating
  - Constructing obstacles
  - Experiencing anxiety (amplifies all other distancing strategies)
  - Using the exclusion tendency
    - Living within very narrow limits to avoid life’s problems

Goal of Psychotherapy

- Understanding faulty lifestyle
  - Better lifestyle includes social interest (“healthy individuals have a well developed social interest, unhealthy individuals do not”)  
  - Adler considered a founder of group and family therapy

- View of the unconscious
  - Denied the importance of repressed traumatic experience
  - Unconscious means that which is not understood
    - Experiences not compatible with personality are not understood
- Therapy leads to compatibility between experience and personality
Areas of Research

- Goal to understand the origins of a person’s worldview, life goal, and lifestyle
- “Entrance gates” to mental life
  - Studies of birth order
  - Studies of first memories
  - Studies of dreams (as an expression of lifestyle)
- Studies of behavioral mannerisms

Birth Order

- Each child within a family is treated differently depending on order of birth
- Birth order influences world view and therefore a person’s lifestyle
- Adler believed it was a “superstition that the situation within the family is the same for each individual child”

The Firstborn Child

- Center of attention until “dethroned”
- Loss of attention and power is deeply felt
- The age at which a child is “dethroned” is significant
- If close in age, firstborn may develop resentment and life-long rivalry
- If distant in age, firstborn may develop a cooperative attitude and help with sibling

The Secondborn Child

- Has to be overly ambitious to keep up with and try to surpass the older sibling
- Adler thought the second-born was the most fortunate
- They are highly motivated without having suffered the first child dethroning

The Youngest Child

- The 2nd worst position after the firstborn
- Typically spoiled, and therefore may struggle to find independence later
- Loses courage to succeed on his or her own
- Even though seen as lazy, they are ambitious as laziness is ambition coupled with discouragement
- Most likely to seek a unique identity within the family, to be different than the rest

The Only Child

- Like the first born, but never dethroned by a sibling
- Only children aren’t dethroned until they start school, where they must share attention with others
- Often have heightened sense of superiority and see the world as a dangerous place
- Struggle with developing social interest as they expect to be pampered and protected
First Memories

- One of the best ways to identify lifestyle is to ask a person about earliest memories.
- They represent the starting point of the psychological development.
  - one’s subjective starting point in life.
- They indicate interpretation of early experiences, which determine worldview.
  - If one’s lifestyle changes, one’s first memories also change.
- Interesting note: Adler found a strong correlation between medical doctors and an earliest memory containing serious illness or death in family.

Dream Analysis

- Adler thought dreams were important and indicate much about a person’s lifestyle.
- The mere occurrence of dreams likely indicated faulty or mistaken lifestyles.
- Those with lifestyles friendly to reality dream little or not at all.
  - “Others, who are further away from common sense...have very frequent dreams.”
- Dreams provide self-deception which helps maintain mistaken lifestyles.

Summary of the Differences between Adler and Freud

Evaluation – Empirical Research

- Birth order and personality characteristics.
  - Ernst and Angst.
    - Reviewed large number of studies and concluded that such research is a waste of time.
- Birth order and intelligence.
  - Zajonc – relationship depends on age at which children within a family are tested.
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- Birth order and innovation.
  - Sullaway found that among scientists, later borns were much more likely to accept scientific innovations than firstborns.
  - Suggests Darwinian viewpoint to understand the effects of birth order.

Evaluation – Empirical Research

- Birth order and homosexuality.
  - FBO – Fraternal birth order effect.
    - The more older brothers a boy has, the more likely he is to be homosexual.
    - Sullaway suggests that FBO occurs because later born sons are open to experience and experimentation.
    - But, FBO effect does not occur if a later born son has only older sisters.

Evaluation – Criticisms

- Difficult to falsify his theory.
- Theory seen as overly simplistic.
  - Change early experience = change lifestyle.
  - Didn’t incorporate genetic, biological factors.
  - We choose our personality.
  - If we are primed for social interest, why all the war, murder, rape, and violent crime in the world?
Evaluation – Contributions

- Emphasis on the importance of social variables
- Widely influential theory and commonly used terminology like “inferiority complex” and “lifestyle”
- Some like Albert Ellis* believe Adler, not Freud the true founder of modern psychotherapy

Discussion Questions

- 1. How might compensation or overcompensation have played a role in the development of your personality?
- 2. How would you explain Adler’s notion of “masculine protest” to someone who argues that the concept is sexist? How might this aspect of Adler’s theory have been different if he had developed it during contemporary times?
- 3. From your own experience, develop the idea that subjective interpretations of reality are more important than objective reality. What examples can you use to argue that this is often true?
- 4. Contrast Adler’s view of therapy with Freudian psychotherapy. How do the goals of therapy differ? What important differences in method can you identify?
- 5. To what extent are Adler’s findings about birth order true of your personality? Be sure to develop specific examples.
- 6. Does Adler’s theory qualify as a scientific theory? Why or why not?

Resources for further independent study

- [http://www.durbinhypnosis.com/adler.htm](http://www.durbinhypnosis.com/adler.htm)
- [http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/adler.html](http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/adler.html)