

# ALFRED ADLER

[ 1870 – 1937 ]

## PERSONALITY THEORIES

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## **Index**

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<b>Index</b>	2
<b><u>Introduction</u></b>	3
<b><u>Biography</u></b>	4
<b><u>Theory</u></b>	5
Life style	6
Teleology	6
Social interest	7
Inferiority	7
Psychological types	9
Childhood	9
Birth order	10
Diagnosis	11
Therapy	11
<b><u>Discussion</u></b>	13
Problems	13
<b><u>Readings</u></b>	14

## Introduction

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I would like to introduce Alfred Adler by talking about someone Adler never knew: Theodore Roosevelt. Born to Martha and Theodore Senior in Manhattan on October 27, 1858, he was said to be a particularly beautiful baby who needed no help entering his new world. His parents were strong, intelligent, handsome, and quite well-to-do. It should have been an idyllic childhood

But "Teedie," as he was called, was not as healthy as he first appeared. He had severe asthma, and tended to catch colds easily, develop coughs and fevers, and suffer from nausea and diarrhea. He was small and thin. His voice was reedy, and remained so even in adulthood. He became malnourished and was often forced by his asthma to sleep sitting up in chairs. Several times, he came dangerously close to dying from lack of oxygen.

Not to paint too negative a picture, Teedie was an active boy – some would say over-active – and had a fantastic personality. He was full of curiosity about nature and would lead expeditions of cousins to find mice, squirrels, snakes, frogs, and anything else that could be dissected or pickled. His repeated confinement when his asthma flared up turned him to books, which he devoured throughout his life. He may have been sickly, but he certainly had a desire to live!

After traveling through Europe with his family, his health became worse. He had grown taller but no more muscular. Finally, with encouragement from the family doctor, Roosevelt Senior encouraged the boy, now twelve, to begin lifting weights. Like anything else he tackled, he did this enthusiastically. He got healthier, and for the first time in his life got through a whole month without an attack of asthma.

When he was thirteen, he became aware of another defect of his: When he found that he couldn't hit anything with the rifle his father had given him. When friends read a billboard to him – he didn't realize it had writing on it – it was discovered that he was terribly nearsighted!

In the same year, he was sent off to the country on his own after a bad attack of asthma. On the way, he was waylaid by a couple of other boys his own age. He found that not only couldn't he defend himself, he couldn't even lay a hand on them. He later announced to his father his intention to learn to box. By the time he went to Harvard, he was not only a healthier Teddy Roosevelt, but was a regular winner of a variety of athletic contests.

The rest, as they say, is history. "Teedie" Roosevelt went on to become a successful New York assemblyman, North Dakota cowboy, New York commissioner of police, Assistant secretary of the Navy, lieutenant colonel of the "Rough Riders," the Governor of New York, and best-selling author, all by the age of forty. With the death of President William McKinley in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt became the youngest president of the United States.

How is it that someone so sickly should become so healthy, vigorous, and successful? Why is it that some children, sickly or not, thrive, while others wither away? Is the drive that Roosevelt had peculiar to him, or is it something that lies in each of us? These kinds of questions intrigued a young Viennese physician named Alfred Adler, and led him to develop his theory, called **Individual Psychology**.

## Biography

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Alfred Adler was born in the suburbs of Vienna on February 7, 1870, the third child, second son, of a Jewish grain merchant and his wife. As a child, Alfred developed rickets, which kept him from walking until he was four years old. At five, he nearly died of pneumonia. It was at this age that he decided to be a physician.

Alfred was an average student and preferred playing outdoors to being cooped up in school. He was quite outgoing, popular, and active, and was known for his efforts at outdoing his older brother, Sigmund.

He received a medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1895. During his college years, he became attached to a group of socialist students, among which he found his wife-to-be, Raissa Timofeyewna Epstein. She was an intellectual and social activist who had come from Russia to study in Vienna. They married in 1897 and eventually had four children, two of whom became psychiatrists.

He began his medical career as an ophthalmologist, but he soon switched to general practice, and established his office in a lower-class part of Vienna, across from the **Prater**, a combination amusement park and circus. His clients included circus people, and it has been suggested (Furtmuller, 1964) that the unusual strengths and weaknesses of the performers led to his insights into **organ inferiorities** and **compensation**.

He then turned to psychiatry, and in 1907 was invited to join Freud's discussion group. After writing papers on organic inferiority, which were quite compatible with Freud's views, he wrote, first, a paper concerning an **aggression instinct**, which Freud did not approve of, and then a paper on children's feelings of inferiority, which suggested that Freud's sexual notions be taken more metaphorically than literally.



Although Freud named Adler the president of the Viennese Analytic Society and the co-editor of the organization's newsletter, Adler didn't stop his criticism. A debate between Adler's supporters and Freud's was arranged, but it resulted in Adler, with nine other members of the organization, resigning to form the Society for Free Psychoanalysis in 1911. This organization became The Society for Individual Psychology in the following year.

During World War I, Adler served as a physician in the Austrian Army, first on the Russian front, and later in a children's hospital. He saw first hand the damage that war does, and his thought turned increasingly to the concept of **social interest**. He felt that if humanity was to survive, it had to change its ways!

After the war, he was involved in various projects, including clinics attached to state schools and the training of teachers. In 1926, he went to the United States to lecture, and he eventually accepted a visiting position at the Long Island College of Medicine. In 1934, he and his family left Vienna forever. On May 28, 1937, during a series of lectures

at Aberdeen University, he died of a heart attack.

## Theory

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Alfred Adler postulates a single "drive" or motivating force behind all our behavior and experience. By the time his theory had gelled into its most mature form, he called that motivating force the **striving for perfection**. It is the desire we all have to fulfill our potentials, to come closer and closer to our ideal. It is, as many of you will already see, very similar to the more popular idea of self-actualization.

"Perfection" and "ideal" are troublesome words, though. On the one hand, they are very positive goals. Shouldn't we all be striving for the ideal? And yet, in psychology, they are often given a rather negative connotation. Perfection and ideals are, practically by definition, things you can't reach. Many people, in fact, live very sad and painful lives trying to be perfect! As you will see, other theorists, like Karen Horney and Carl Rogers, emphasize this problem. Adler talks about it, too. But he sees this negative kind of idealism as a perversion of the more positive understanding. We will return to this in a little while.

Striving for perfection was not the first phrase Adler used to refer to his single motivating force. His earliest phrase was the **aggression drive**, referring to the reaction we have when other drives, such as our need to eat, be sexually satisfied, get things done, or be loved, are frustrated. It might be better called the assertiveness drive, since we tend to think of aggression as physical and negative. But it was Adler's idea of the aggression drive that first caused friction between him and Freud. Freud was afraid that it would detract from the crucial position of the sex drive in psychoanalytic theory. Despite Freud's dislike for the idea, he himself introduced something very similar much later in his life: the death instinct.

Another word Adler used to refer to basic motivation was **compensation**, or striving to overcome. Since we all have problems, short-comings, inferiorities of one sort or another, Adler felt, earlier in his writing, that our personalities could be accounted for by the ways in which we do – or don't – compensate or overcome those problems. The idea still plays an important role in his theory, as you will see, but he rejected it as a label for the basic motive because it makes it sound as if it is your problems that cause you to be what you are.

One of Adler's earliest phrases was **masculine protest**. He noted something pretty obvious in his culture (and by no means absent from our own): Boys were held in higher esteem than girls. Boys wanted, often desperately, to be thought of as strong, aggressive, in control – i.e. "masculine" – and not weak, passive, or dependent – i.e. "feminine." The point, of course, was that men are somehow basically better than women. They do, after all, have the power, the education, and apparently the talent and motivation needed to do "great things," and women don't.

You can still hear this in the kinds of comments older people make about little boys and girls: If a baby boy fusses or demands to have his own way (masculine protest!), they will say he's a natural boy; If a little girl is quiet and shy, she is praised for her femininity; If, on the other hand, the boy is quiet and shy, they worry that he might grow up to be a sissy; Or if a girl is assertive and gets her way, they call her a "tomboy" and will try to reassure you that she'll grow out of it!

But Adler did not see men's assertiveness and success in the world as due to some innate superiority. He saw it as a reflection of the fact that boys are encouraged to be assertive in life, and girls are discouraged. Both boys and girls, however, begin life with the capacity for "protest!" Because so many people misunderstood him to mean that men are, innately, more assertive, lead him to limit his use of the phrase.

The last phrase he used, before switching to striving for perfection, was **striving for superiority**. His use of this phrase reflects one of the philosophical roots of his ideas: Friederich Nietzsche developed a philosophy that considered the will to power the basic motive of human life. Although striving for superiority does refer to the desire to be better, it also contains the idea that we want to be better than others, rather than better in our own right. Adler later tended to use striving for superiority more in reference to unhealthy or neurotic striving.

## Life style

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A lot of this playing with words reflects Adler's groping towards a really different kind of personality theory than that represented by Freud's. Freud's theory was what we nowadays would call a reductionistic one: He tried most of his life to get the concepts down to the physiological level. Although he admitted failure in the end, life is nevertheless explained in terms of basic physiological needs. In addition, Freud tended to "carve up" the person into smaller theoretical concepts – the id, ego, and superego – as well.

Adler was influenced by the writings of Jan Smuts, the South African philosopher and statesman. Smuts felt that, in order to understand people, we have to understand them more as unified wholes than as a collection of bits and pieces, and we have to understand them in the context of their environment, both physical and social. This approach is called **holism**, and Adler took it very much to heart.

First, to reflect the idea that we should see people as wholes rather than parts, he decided to label his approach to psychology **individual psychology**. The word individual means literally "un-divided."

Second, instead of talking about a person's personality, with the traditional sense of internal traits, structures, dynamics, conflicts, and so on, he preferred to talk about **style of life** (nowadays, "lifestyle"). Life style refers to how you live your life, how you handle problems and interpersonal relations. Here's what he himself had to say about it: "The style of life of a tree is the individuality of a tree expressing itself and molding itself in an environment. We recognize a style when we see it against a background of an environment different from what we expect, for then we realize that every tree has a life pattern and is not merely a mechanical reaction to the environment."

## Teleology

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The last point – that lifestyle is "not merely a mechanical reaction" – is a second way in which Adler differs dramatically from Freud. For Freud, the things that happened in the past, such as early childhood trauma, determine what you are like in the present. Adler sees motivation as a matter of moving towards the future, rather than being driven, mechanistically, by the past. We are drawn towards our goals, our purposes, our ideals. This is called **teleology**.

Moving things from the past into the future has some dramatic effects. Since the future is not here yet, a teleological approach to motivation takes the necessity out of things. In a traditional mechanistic approach, cause leads to effect: If a, b, and c happen, then x, y, and z must, of necessity, happen. But you don't have to reach your goals or meet your ideals, and they can change along the way. Teleology acknowledges that life is hard and uncertain, but it always has room for change!

Another major influence on Adler's thinking was the philosopher Hans Vaihinger, who wrote a book called **The Philosophy of "As If."** Vaihinger believed that ultimate truth would always be beyond us, but that, for practical purposes, we need to create partial truths. His main interest was science, so he gave as examples such partial truths as protons and electrons, waves of light, gravity as distortion of space, and so on. Contrary to what many of us non-scientists tend to assume, these are not things that anyone has seen or proven to exist: They are useful constructs. They work for the moment, let us do science, and hopefully will lead to better, more useful constructs. We use them "as if" they were true. He called these partial truths **fictions**.

Vaihinger, and Adler, pointed out that we use these fictions in day to day living as well. We behave as if we knew the world would be here tomorrow, as if we were sure what good and bad are all about, as if everything we see is as we see it, and so on. Adler called this **fictional finalism**. You can understand the phrase most easily if you think about an example: Many people behave as if there were a heaven or a hell in their personal future. Of course, there may be a heaven or a hell, but most of us don't think of this as a proven fact. That makes it a "fiction" in Vaihinger's and Adler's sense of the word. And finalism refers to the teleology of it: The fiction lies in the future, and yet influences our behavior today.

Adler added that, at the center of each of our lifestyles, there sits one of these fictions, an important one about who we are and where we are going.

## Social interest

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Second in importance only to striving for perfection is the idea of **social interest** or social feeling (originally called **Gemeinschaftsgefühl** or "community feeling"). In keeping with his holism, it is easy to see that anyone "striving for perfection" can hardly do so without considering his or her social environment. As social animals, we simply don't exist, much less thrive, without others, and even the most resolute people-hater forms that hatred in a social context!

Adler felt that social concern was not simply inborn, nor just learned, but a combination of both: It is based on an innate disposition, but it has to be nurtured to survive. That it is to some extent innate is shown by the way babies and small children often show sympathy for others without having been taught to do so. Notice how, when one baby in a nursery begins to cry, they all begin to cry. Or how, when we walk into a room where people are laughing, we ourselves begin to smile.

And yet, right along with the examples of how generous little children can be to others, we have examples of how selfish and cruel they can be. Although we instinctively seem to know that what hurts him can hurt me, and vice versa, we also instinctively seem to know that, if we have to choose between it hurting him and it hurting me, we'll take "hurting him" every time! So the tendency to empathize must be supported by parents and the culture at large. Even if we disregard the possibilities of conflict between my needs and yours, empathy involves feeling the pain of others, and in a hard world, that can quickly become overwhelming. Much easier to just "toughen up" and ignore that unpleasant empathy – unless society steps in on empathy's behalf!

One misunderstanding Adler wanted to avoid was the idea that social interest was somehow another version of extraversion. Americans in particular tend to see social concern as a matter of being open and friendly and slapping people on the back and calling them by their first names. Some people may indeed express their social concern this way; But other people just use that kind of behavior to further their own ends. Adler meant social concern or feeling not in terms of particular social behaviors, but in the much broader sense of caring for family, for community, for society, for humanity, even for life. Social concern is a matter of being useful to others.

On the other hand, a lack of social concern is, for Adler, the very definition of mental ill-health: All failures – neurotics, psychotics, criminals, drunkards, problem children, suicides, perverts, and prostitutes – are failures because they are lacking in social interest.... Their goal of success is a goal of personal superiority, and their triumphs have meaning only to themselves.

## Inferiority

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Here we are, all of us, "pulled" towards fulfillment, perfection, self-actualization. And yet some of us – the failures – end up terribly unfulfilled, baldly imperfect, and far from self-actualized. And all because we lack social interest, or, to put it in the positive form, because we are too self-interested. So what makes so many of us self-interested?

Adler says it's a matter of being overwhelmed by our **inferiority**. If you are moving along, doing well, feeling competent, you can afford to think of others. If you are not, if life is getting the best of you, then your attentions become increasingly focussed on yourself.

Obviously, everyone suffers from inferiority in one form or another. For example, Adler began his theoretical work considering **organ inferiority**, that is, the fact that each of us has weaker, as well as stronger, parts of our anatomy or physiology. Some of us are born with heart murmurs, or develop heart problems early in life; Some have weak lungs, or kidneys, or early liver problems; Some of us stutter or lisp; Some have diabetes, or asthma, or polio; Some have weak eyes, or poor hearing, or a poor musculature; Some of us have innate tendencies to being heavy, others to being skinny; Some of us are retarded, some of us are deformed; Some of us are terribly tall or terribly short; And so on and so on.

Adler noted that many people respond to these organic inferiorities with **compensation**. They make up for

their deficiencies in some way: The inferior organ can be strengthened and even become stronger than it is in others; Or other organs can be overdeveloped to take up the slack; Or the person can psychologically compensate for the organic problem by developing certain skills or even certain personality styles. There are, as you well know, many examples of people who overcame great physical odds to become what those who are better endowed physically wouldn't even dream of!

Sadly, there are also many people who cannot handle their difficulties, and live lives of quiet despair. I would guess that our optimistic, up-beat society seriously underestimates their numbers.

But Adler soon saw that this is only part of the picture. Even more people have **psychological inferiorities**. Some of us are told that we are dumb, or ugly, or weak. Some of us come to believe that we are just plain no good. In school, we are tested over and over, and given grades that tell us we aren't as good as the next person. Or we are demeaned for our pimples or our bad posture and find ourselves without friends or dates. Or we are forced into basketball games, where we wait to see which team will be stuck with us. In these examples, it's not a matter of true organic inferiority – we are not really retarded or deformed or weak – but we learn to believe that we are. Again, some compensate by becoming good at what we feel inferior about. More compensate by becoming good at something else, but otherwise retaining our sense of inferiority. And some just never develop any self esteem at all.

If the preceding hasn't hit you personally yet, Adler also noted an even more general form of inferiority: The natural inferiority of children. All children are, by nature, smaller, weaker, less socially and intellectually competent, than the adults around them. Adler suggested that, if we look at children's games, toys, and fantasies, they tend to have one thing in common: The desire to grow up, to be big, to be an adult. This kind of compensation is really identical with striving for perfection! Many children, however, are left with the feeling that other people will always be better than they are.

If you are overwhelmed by the forces of inferiority – whether it is your body hurting, the people around you holding you in contempt, or just the general difficulties of growing up – you develop an **inferiority complex**. Looking back on my own childhood, I can see several sources for later inferiority complexes: Physically, I've tended to be heavy, with some real "fat boy" stages along the way; Also, because I was born in Holland, I didn't grow up with the skills of baseball, football, and basketball in my genes; Finally, my artistically talented parents often left me – unintentionally – with the feeling that I'd never be as good as they were. So, as I grew up, I became shy and withdrawn, and concentrated on the only thing I was good at, school. It took a long time for me to realize my self-worth.

If you weren't "super-nerd," you may have had one of the most common inferiority complexes I've come across: "Math phobia!" Perhaps it started because you could never remember what seven times eight was. Every year, there was some topic you never quite got the hang of. Every year, you fell a little further behind. And then you hit the crisis point: Algebra. How could you be expected to know what "x" is when you still didn't know what seven times eight was?

Many, many people truly believe that they are not meant to do math, that they are missing that piece of their brains or something. I'd like to tell you here and now that anyone can do math, if they are taught properly and when they are really ready. That aside, you've got to wonder how many people have given up being scientists, teachers, business people, or even going to college, because of this inferiority complex.

But the inferiority complex is not just a little problem, it's a **neurosis**, meaning it's a life-size problem. You become shy and timid, insecure, indecisive, cowardly, submissive, compliant, and so on. You begin to rely on people to carry you along, even manipulating them into supporting you: "You think I'm smart / pretty / strong / sexy / good, don't you?" Eventually, you become a drain on them, and you may find yourself by yourself. Nobody can take all that self-centered whining for long!

There is another way in which people respond to inferiority besides compensation and the inferiority complex: You can also develop a **superiority complex**. The superiority complex involves covering up your inferiority by pretending to be superior. If you feel small, one way to feel big is to make everyone else feel even smaller! Bullies, braggarts, and petty dictators everywhere are the prime example. More subtle

examples are the people who are given to attention-getting dramatics, the ones who feel powerful when they commit crimes, and the ones who put others down for their gender, race, ethnic origins, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, weight, height, etc. etc. Even more subtle still are the people who hide their feelings of worthlessness in the delusions of power afforded by alcohol and drugs.

## Psychological types

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Although all neurosis is, for Adler, a matter of insufficient social interest, he did note that three types could be distinguished based on the different levels of **energy** they involved:

The first is the **ruling type**. They are, from childhood on, characterized by a tendency to be rather aggressive and dominant over others. Their energy – the strength of their striving after personal power – is so great that they tend to push over anything or anybody who gets in their way. The most energetic of them are bullies and sadists; somewhat less energetic ones hurt others by hurting themselves, and include alcoholics, drug addicts, and suicides.

The second is the **leaning type**. They are sensitive people who have developed a shell around themselves which protects them, but they must rely on others to carry them through life's difficulties. They have low energy levels and so become dependent. When overwhelmed, they develop what we typically think of as neurotic symptoms: phobias, obsessions and compulsions, general anxiety, hysteria, amnesias, and so on, depending on individual details of their lifestyle.

The third type is the **avoiding type**. These have the lowest levels of energy and only survive by essentially avoiding life – especially other people. When pushed to the limits, they tend to become psychotic, retreating finally into their own personal worlds.

There is a fourth type as well: the **socially useful type**. This is the healthy person, one who has both social interest and energy. Note that without energy, you can't really have social interest, since you wouldn't be able to actually do anything for anyone!

Adler noted that his four types looked very much like the four types proposed by the ancient Greeks. They, too, noticed that some people are always sad, others always angry, and so on. But they attributed these temperaments (from the same root as temperature) to the relative presence of four bodily fluids called **humors**.

If you had too much yellow bile, you would be **choleric** (hot and dry) and angry all the time. The choleric is, roughly, the ruling type.

If you had too much phlegm, you would be **phlegmatic** (cold and wet) and be sluggish. This is roughly the leaning type.

If you had too much black bile – and we don't know what the Greeks were referring to here – you would be **melancholy** (cold and dry) and tend to be sad constantly. This is roughly the avoiding type.

And, if you had a lot of blood relative to the other humors, you be in a good humor, **sanguine** (warm and moist). This naturally cheerful and friendly person represents the socially useful type.

One word of warning about Adler's types: Adler believed very strongly that each person is a unique individual with his or her own unique lifestyle. The idea of types is, for him, only a **heuristic** device, meaning a useful fiction, not an absolute reality!

## Childhood

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Adler, like Freud, saw personality or lifestyle as something established quite early in life. In fact, the **prototype** of your lifestyle tends to be fixed by about five years old. New experiences, rather than change that prototype, tend to be interpreted in terms of the prototype, "force fit," in other words, into preconceived

notions, just like new acquaintances tend to get "force fit" into our stereotypes.

Adler felt that there were three basic childhood situations that most contribute to a faulty lifestyle. The first is one we've spoken of several times: organ inferiorities, as well as early childhood diseases. They are what he called "overburdened," and if someone doesn't come along to draw their attention to others, they will remain focussed on themselves. Most will go through life with a strong sense of inferiority; A few will overcompensate with a superiority complex. Only with the encouragement of loved ones will some truly compensate.

The second is **pampering**. Many children are taught, by the actions of others, that they can take without giving. Their wishes are everyone else's commands. This may sound like a wonderful situation, until you realize that the pampered child fails in two ways: First, he doesn't learn to do for himself, and discovers later that he is truly inferior; And secondly, he doesn't learn any other way to deal with others than the giving of commands. And society responds to pampered people in only one way: hatred.

The third is **neglect**. A child who is neglected or abused learns what the pampered child learns, but learns it in a far more direct manner: They learn inferiority because they are told and shown every day that they are of no value; They learn selfishness because they are taught to trust no one. If you haven't known love, you don't develop a capacity for it later. We should note that the neglected child includes not only orphans and the victims of abuse, but the children whose parents are never there, and the ones raised in a rigid, authoritarian manner.

## **Birth order**

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Adler must be credited as the first theorist to include not only a child's mother and father and other adults as early influence on the child, but the child's brothers and sisters as well. His consideration of the effects of siblings and the order in which they were born is probably what Adler is best-known for. I have to warn you, though, that Adler considered birth-order another one of those heuristic ideas – useful fictions – that contribute to understanding people, but must be not be taken too seriously.

The **only child** is more likely than others to be pampered, with all the ill results we've discussed. After all, the parents of the only child have put all their eggs in one basket, so to speak, and are more likely to take special care – sometimes anxiety-filled care – of their pride and joy. If the parents are abusive, on the other hand, the only child will have to bear that abuse alone.

The **first child** begins life as an only child, with all the attention to him- or herself. Sadly, just as things are getting comfortable, the second child arrives and "**dethrones**" the first. At first, the child may battle for his or her lost position. He or she might try acting like the baby – after all, it seems to work for the baby! – only to be rebuffed and told to grow up. Some become disobedient and rebellious, others sullen and withdrawn. Adler believes that first children are more likely than any other to become problem children. More positively, first children are often precocious. They tend to be relatively solitary and more conservative than the other children in the family.

The **second child** is in a very different situation: He or she has the first child as a sort of "pace-setter," and tends to become quite competitive, constantly trying to surpass the older child. They often succeed, but many feel as if the race is never done, and they tend to dream of constant running without getting anywhere. Other "middle" children will tend to be similar to the second child, although each may focus on a different "competitor."

The **youngest child** is likely to be the most pampered in a family with more than one child. After all, he or she is the only one who is never dethroned! And so youngest children are the second most likely source of problem children, just behind first children. On the other hand, the youngest may also feel incredible inferiority, with everyone older and "therefore" superior. But, with all those "pace-setters" ahead, the youngest can also be driven to exceed all of them.

Who is a first, second, or youngest child isn't as obvious as it might seem. If there is a long stretch between

children, they may not see themselves and each other the same way as if they were closer together. There are eight years between my first and second daughter and three between the second and the third: That would make my first daughter an only child, my second a first child, and my third the second and youngest! And if some of the children are boys and some girls, it makes a difference as well. A second child who is a girl might not take her older brother as someone to compete with; A boy in a family of girls may feel more like the only child; And so on. As with everything in Adler's system, birth order is to be understood in the context of the individual's own special circumstances.

## Diagnosis

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In order to help you to discover the "fictions" your lifestyle is based upon, Adler would look at a great variety of things – your birth-order position, for example. First, he might examine you and your medical history for any possible organic roots to your problem. A serious illness, for example, may have side effects that closely resemble neurotic and psychotic symptoms.

In your very first session with you, he might ask for your **earliest childhood memory**. He is not so much looking for the truth here as for an indication of that early prototype of your present lifestyle. If your earliest memory involves security and a great deal of attention, that might indicate pampering; If you recall some aggressive competition with your older brother, that might suggest the strong strivings of a second child and the "ruling" type of personality; If your memory involves neglect and hiding under the sink, it might mean severe inferiority and avoidance; And so on.

He might also ask about any childhood problems you may have had: Bad habits involving eating or the bathroom might indicate ways in which you controlled your parents; Fears, such as a fear of the dark or of being left alone, might suggest pampering; Stuttering is likely to mean that speech was associated with anxiety; Overt aggression and stealing may be signs of a superiority complex; Daydreaming, isolation, laziness, and lying may be various ways of avoiding facing one's inferiorities.

Like Freud and Jung, dreams (and daydreams) were important to Adler. He took a more direct approach to them, though: Dreams are an expression of your style of life and, far from contradicting your daytime feelings, are unified with your conscious life. Usually, they reflect the goals you have and the problems you face in reaching them. If you can't remember any dreams, Adler isn't put off: Go ahead and fantasize right then and there. Your fantasies will reflect your lifestyle just as well.

Adler would also pay attention to how you express yourself: Your posture, the way you shake hands, the gestures you use, how you move, your "body language," as we say today. He notes that pampered people often lean against something! Even your sleep postures may contribute some insight: A person who sleeps in the fetal position with the covers over his or her head is clearly different from one who sprawls over the entire bed completely uncovered!

He would also want to know the exogenous factors, the events that triggered the symptoms that concern you. He gives a number of common triggers: Sexual problems, like uncertainty, guilt, the first time, impotence, and so on; The problems women face, such as pregnancy and childbirth and the onset and end of menstruation; Your love life, dating, engagement, marriage, and divorce; Your work life, including school, exams, career decisions, and the job itself; And mortal danger or the loss of a loved one.

Last, and not least, Adler was open to the less rational and scientific, more art-like side of diagnosis: He suggested we not ignore empathy, intuition, and just plain guess-work!

## Therapy

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There are considerable differences between Adler's therapy and Freud's: First, Adler preferred to have everyone sitting up and talking face to face. Further, he went to great lengths to avoid appearing too authoritarian. In fact, he advised that the therapist never allow the patient to force him into the role of an

authoritarian figure, because that allows the patient to play some of the same games he or she is likely to have played many times before: The patient may set you up as a savior, only to attack you when you inevitably reveal your humanness. By pulling you down, they feel as if they are raising themselves, with their neurotic lifestyles, up.

This is essentially the explanation Adler gave for resistance: When a patient forgets appointments, comes in late, demands special favors, or generally becomes stubborn and uncooperative, it is not, as Freud thought, a matter of repression. Rather, resistance is just a sign of the patient's lack of courage to give up their neurotic lifestyle.

The patient must come to understand the nature of his or her lifestyle and its roots in self-centered fictions. This understanding or insight cannot be forced: If you just tell someone "look, here is your problem!" he or she will only pull away from you and look for ways of bolstering their present fictions. Instead, A patient must be brought into such a state of feeling that he likes to listen, and wants to understand. Only then can he be influenced to live what he has understood. (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956, p. 335.) It is the patient, not the therapist, who is ultimately responsible for curing him- or herself.

Finally, the therapist must encourage the patient, which means awakening his or her social interest, and the energy that goes with it. By developing a genuine human relationship with the patient, the therapist provides the basic form of social interest, which the patient can then transfer to others.

## Discussion

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Although Adler's theory may be less interesting than Freud's, with its sexuality, or Jung's, with its mythology, it has probably struck you as the most common-sensical of the three. Students generally like Adler and his theory. In fact, quite a few personality theorists like him, too. Maslow, for example, once said that, the older he gets, the more right Adler seems. If you have some knowledge of Carl Rogers' brand of therapy, you may have noticed how similar it is to Adler's. And a number of students of personality theories have noted that the theorists called Neo-Freudians – Horney, Fromm, and Sullivan – should really have been called Neo-Adlerians.

And so the "positives" of Adler's theory don't really need to be listed: His clear descriptions of people's complaints, his straight-forward and common-sense interpretations of their problems, his simple theoretical structure, his trust and even affection for the common person, all make his theory both comfortable and highly influential.

## Problems

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Criticisms of Adler tend to involve the issue of whether or not, or to what degree, his theory is scientific. The mainstream of psychology today is experimentally oriented, which means, among other things, that the concepts a theory uses must be measurable and manipulable. This in turn means that an experimental orientation prefers physical or behavioral variables. Adler, as you saw, uses basic concepts that are far from physical and behavioral: Striving for perfection? How do you measure that? Or compensation? Or feelings of inferiority? Or social interest? The experimental method also makes a basic assumption: That all things operate in terms of cause and effect. Adler would certainly agree that physical things do so, but he would adamantly deny that people do! Instead, he takes the teleological route, that people are "determined" by their ideals, goals, values, "final fictions." Teleology takes the necessity out of things: A person doesn't have to respond a certain way to a certain circumstance; A person has choices to make; A person creates his or her own personality or lifestyle. From the experimental perspective, these things are illusions that a scientist, even a personality theorist, dare not give in to.

Even if you are open to the teleological approach, though, there are criticisms you can make regarding how scientific Adler's theory is: Many of the details of his theory are too anecdotal, that is, are true in particular cases, but don't necessarily have the generality Adler seems to claim for them. A first child (even broadly defined) doesn't necessarily feel dethroned, nor a second child necessarily feel competitive, for example.

Adler could, however, respond to these criticisms very easily: First, didn't we just finish saying that, if you accept teleology, nothing about human personality is necessary. And secondly, didn't he go to great lengths to explain his ideas about fictional finalism? All of his concepts are useful constructs, not absolute truths, and science is just a matter of creating increasingly useful constructs. So if you have better ideas, let's hear them!

## **Readings**

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If you are interested in learning more about Alfred Adler's theory, go straight to Ansbacher and Ansbacher's **The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler**. They take selections from his writings, organize them, and add running commentary. It introduces all of his ideas in a very readable fashion.

His own books include **Understanding Human Nature**, **Problems of Neurosis**, **The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology**, and **Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind**.

You can find early and recent work by Adler and others in English in **The International Journal of Individual Psychology**.