

ADLER'S INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY: THE ORIGINAL POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

In addressing foundational perspectives, proponents of the current positive psychology movement typically identify Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Gordon Allport as precursors and ancestors. This article demonstrates that the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler preceded the aforementioned ancestors of positive psychology and could be viewed as the original positive psychology. Following a brief overview of key ideas from Adler's Individual Psychology, the authors specifically address two foundational tenets of Adler's theory that particularly resonate with those from positive psychology and then address more broadly the remarkable common ground between Adler's mature theoretical ideas and the positive psychology movement.

Keywords: *Alfred Adler, Adlerian Psychology, Individual Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, Positive Psychology*

Resumen

Los defensores de la Psicología Positiva, cuando abordan las perspectivas fundacionales, suelen identificar a Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers y Gordon Allport como precursores y predecesores. Este artículo demuestra que la Psicología Individual de Alfred Adler precedió a estos precursores de la Psicología Positiva y se podría considerar como la Psicología Positiva original. Tras un breve resumen de las ideas clave de la Psicología Individual de Adler, los autores presentan específicamente los dos principios fundacionales de la teoría de Adler que se repiten particularmente en la Psicología Positiva y a continuación ofrecen una perspectiva más amplia de las bases comunes notables entre las ideas teóricas tardías de Adler y el movimiento de la Psicología Positiva.

Palabras clave: *Alfred Adler, Psicología Adleriana, Psicología Individual, Psicología Humanista, Psicología Positiva*



Alfred Adler developed a theory of personality and maladjustment, and an approach to counseling and psychotherapy, that he called Individual Psychology. Adler was born in 1870 in a suburb of Vienna. He attended public school in Vienna and then trained as a physician at the University of Vienna. Adler entered private practice as an ophthalmologist. A short time later he switched to general practice and then to neurology. In 1902, he was invited by Sigmund Freud to join the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Due to significant theoretical disagreement with Freud, Adler resigned from the Society in 1911 (Ellenberger, 1970; Hoffman, 1994). He spent the remainder of his life—he died in 1937—developing a personality theory and approach to counseling and psychotherapy so far ahead of his time that Albert Ellis (1970) declared, “Alfred Adler, more than even Freud, is probably the true father of modern psychotherapy” (p. 11). Corey (1996, 2005) stated that Adler’s most important contribution was his influence on other theoretical perspectives. Adler’s influence has been acknowledged by—or his vision traced to—neo-Freudian approaches, existential therapy, person-centered therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapies, reality therapy, family systems approaches, and, more recently, constructivist and social constructionist (e.g., solution-focused and narrative) therapies (Oberst & Stewart, 2003; Watts, 1999; Watts & Critelli, 1997; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000).

Unfortunately, many scholars appear to be unaware of the evolution of Adler’s theory. All too often, Adler is erroneously identified in the secondary source literature as “neo-Freudian” and placed alongside discussions of other psychoanalytic theories (Watts & Critelli, 1997). Although it is true that the neo-Freudians were significantly influenced by Adler (Ellenberger, 1970), it is not true that Adler’s Individual Psychology was merely the first neo-Freudian position.

When Maslow introduced his “third force,” subsequently known as “humanistic psychology,” he listed Adlerians first among the groups included and the *Journal of Individual Psychology* among the five journals where these groups are most likely to publish. He also invited H. L. Ansbacher, as representing Adlerian psychology, to become a founding sponsor of the Association for Humanistic Psychology and member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. (Ansbacher, 1990, p. 46)

Adler’s theory development evolved from his early psychoanalytic (1902–1911) views and post-psychoanalytic (1911–WWI) perspectives, to his humanistic and constructivist (post WWI–1937). When examining Adler’s later phase, one can readily see the contemporary relevance of Adler’s thinking in several streams of psychological thinking. In particular, I would like to address Adler’s thoughts on striving for perfection or superiority and *gemeinschaftsgefühl* (community feeling/social interest) as evincing Adlerian psychology’s position as arguably the first *positive psychology* in the 20th century (Watts, 2012). Prochaska and Norcross (2010), echoing Ellenberger (1970), stated that many of “Adler’s ideas have quietly permeated modern psychological thinking, often without notice. It would not be

easy to find another author from which so much has been borrowed from all sides without acknowledgment than Alfred Adler” (p. 91). This appears particularly true regarding the positive psychology movement. Adlerian ideas are replete in the positive psychology literature but there is no substantive mention of Adler or Adlerian psychology. To demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Adler’s ideas, I will first provide a brief overview of some key ideas from Adler’s Individual Psychology. Next I will specifically address two foundational tenets of Adler’s theory that particularly resonate with those from positive psychology: striving for perfection or superiority and *gemeinschaftsgefühl* (community feeling/social interest). Lastly, I will address more broadly the remarkable common ground between Adler’s mature theoretical ideas and the positive psychology movement.

A Few Key Concepts from Adler’s Individual Psychology

Individual Psychology, or Adlerian Psychology, is often misunderstood as primarily focusing on individuals. However, Adler chose the name Individual Psychology (from the Latin, “individuum” meaning indivisible) for his theoretical approach because he eschewed reductionism. He emphasized that persons cannot be properly understood as a collection of parts (e.g., Freud), but rather should be viewed as a unity, as a whole. An integration of cognitive, existential-humanistic, psychodynamic, and systemic perspectives, Adlerian theory is a holistic, phenomenological, socially-oriented, and teleological (goal-directed) approach to understanding and working with people. It emphasizes the proactive, form-giving and fictional nature of human cognition and its role in constructing the “realities” that persons know and to which they respond. Adlerian theory asserts that humans construct, manufacture, or *narratize* ways of viewing and experiencing the world and then take these *fictions* for truth. It is an optimistic theory affirming that humans are not determined by heredity or environment. Rather, they are creative, proactive, meaning-making beings, having the ability to choose and to be responsible for their choices (Adler, 1956; Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2006; Mosak & Maniaci, 1999; Watts, 1999; Watts & Shulman, 2003; Watts & Eckstein, 2009).

Adler affirmed that humans are characterized by unity across the broad spectrum of personality—cognitions, affect, and behavior. *Life style* or *style of life*, the Adlerian nomenclature for personality, is a cognitive blueprint or personal metanarrative containing the person’s unique and individually created convictions, goals and personal beliefs for coping with the tasks and challenges of life. This life plan is uniquely created by each person, begins as a prototype in early childhood, and is progressively refined throughout life. The social context of children includes both the cultural values of their culture of origin and their experiences within their *family constellation*, Adler’s phrase for the operative influences of the family’s structure (including one’s position in the family or *psychological birth order*), values, and dynamics. Children, therefore, perceive others and the world as paralleling their first social environment, their family, and eventually frame or filter

the larger experience of life –and interpersonal relationships– on the basis of these initial relationships and perceptions of the same (Carlson et al., 2006; Oberst & Stewart, 2003; Watts & Shulman, 2003).

According to Adlerian theory, humans are proactive –versus reactive and representational– in regard to the development of the style of life. This idea is inherent in the Adlerian construct known as the *creative power of the self* or the *creative self*. Because of this creative power, people function like actors authoring their own scripts, directing their own actions, and constructing their own personalities within a socially-embedded context. Humans co-construct the realities to which they respond (Watts & Shulman, 2003).

Striving for Perfection or Superiority

Adler’s understanding of “striving” evolved over time and he used various words like completion, mastery, perfection, and superiority to describe how humans seek to move from “the present situation, as observed and interpreted, to a better one, one that was superior to the present status” (Manaster & Corsini, 1982, p. 41). According to Adler, the central human directionality is toward competence or self-mastery, what Adler called *striving for perfection or superiority*. This is the individual’s creative and compensatory answer to the normal and universal feelings of insignificance and disempowerment, and the accompanying beliefs that one is less than what one should be (i.e., *feelings of inferiority*). Thus, striving for perfection or superiority is the natural human desire to move from a perceived negative position to a perceived positive one.

This concept of striving or teleological/teleonomical movement is seen in the writings of various personality theorists including Kurt Goldstein, Karen Horney, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Otto Rank, Carl Rogers, and Robert White (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004; Manaster & Corsini, 1982). One can find similar ideas in various contemporary theoretical perspectives, including constructivist, evolutionary, and positive psychologies (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Mahoney, 2003; Rasmussen, 2010; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011). For example, in discussing happiness and human potential, Ryan and Deci (2001) described optimal functioning and development as “the striving for perfection the represents the realization of one’s true potential” (p. 144). Ryan and Deci’s position is essentially verbatim to that of Adler’s Individual Psychology.

All of the aforementioned personality theorists agree with Adler that humans are striving, seeking to actualize potential, and in the process of “becoming”, and most of the theories created by these theorists are listed as early exemplars of positive psychology in that literature. Adler’s theory, however, is not found in the various lists; the positive psychology literature typically lists Maslow and Rogers as the earliest exemplars, even though Adler clearly preceded both in his formulation of an optimistic, growth-oriented psychology.

Gemeinschaftsgefühl (Community Feeling/Social Interest)

Adlerian Psychology is a relational theory. It asserts that humans are socially-embedded and that knowledge is relationally distributed. Adler stressed that persons cannot be properly understood apart from their social context. Consequently, the Adlerian perspective on the tasks of life—love, society, work, spirituality, and self—is a strongly relational one. These tasks of life address intimate love relationships, relationships with friends and fellow beings in society, our relationships at work, our relationship with self, and our relationship with God or the universe (Carlson et al., 2006; Watts, 2003; Watts, Williamson, & Williamson, 2004).

According to Manaster and Corsini (1982), the most unique and valuable concept in Adlerian psychology is *gemeinschaftsgefühl*. The cardinal tenet of Adler's theory, it is typically translated *social interest* or *community feeling*, and emphasizes the relational, social-contextual nature of the theory. I believe both community feeling and social interest are needed for a holistic understanding of *gemeinschaftsgefühl*; that is, community feeling addresses the affective and motivational aspects and social interest the cognitive and behavioral ones. Thus, true community feeling (i.e., sense of belonging, empathy, caring, compassion, acceptance of others, etc.) results in social interest (i.e., thoughts and behaviors that contribute to the common good, the good of the whole at both micro- and macro-systemic levels); true social interest is motivated by community feeling (Watts & Eckstein, 2009).

A significant difference between Adler and other personality theorists regarding the aforementioned "striving" is the role of community feeling/social interest. Adler emphasized that striving for perfection or superiority occurs in a relational context and this striving may occur in either a socially useful or a socially useless manner. How one strives, and the manifest behaviors, are predicated on one's community feeling/social interest. Thus, in Adler's (1933/2012) mature theoretical formulation, striving for perfection means that one is striving toward greater competence, both for oneself and the common good of humanity. This is a horizontal striving that is useful both for self and others, seeking to build both self- and other-esteem. Striving for superiority means to move in a self-centered manner, seeking to be superior over others. This is a vertical striving that primarily pursues personal gain without contribution to or consideration of others and the common good. The manner one chooses to strive constitutes the Adlerian criterion for mental health: healthy development follows the goal of community feeling and social interest; maladjustment is the consequence of pursuing narcissistic self-interest (Adler, 1933/2012, 1956; Manaster & Corsini, 1982).

Recent research by Leak and Leak (2006) and Barlow, Tobin, and Schmidt (2009) indicated that social interest is related to numerous aspects of positive psychology (e.g., hope, other-centered values, optimism, prosocial moral reasoning, psychosocial maturity, subjective well-being). Nevertheless, positive psychol-

ogy authors appear to have ignored an important early positive psychology construct: Adler's *gemeinschaftsgefühl*.

Adler's Individual Psychology and Contemporary Positive Psychology

Snyder and Lopez (2002) identified the positive psychology movement as a "new approach" because "psychology and its sister disciplines... focus on the weaknesses in humankind" (p. ix). In affirming the positive qualities of humankind, the editors state, "*no science, including psychology, looks seriously at this positive side of people*" [emphasis in original, p. x]. Seligman (2002) noted that the goal of positive psychology is to move from a preoccupation with pathology to a more balanced perspective that includes the idea of "a fulfilled individual and a thriving community" by emphasizing that building strengths in people "is the most potent weapon in the arsenal of therapy" (p. 3). It is remarkable that Seligman's goal is exactly the evolution of Adler's theory development. Prior to World War I, Adler was more focused on deficits, pathology, and remediation. Adler's mature theory, however, focused on strengths, healthy human development, and prevention.

Given Adler's evolution from a deficit and pathology focus to one emphasizing strength, health, and prevention, it is not surprising to find significant common ground between Adlerian theory and the positive psychology movement. Although not an exhaustive list, Carlson et al. (2006) identified the following shared emphases: normal human growth and development; prevention/education rather than merely remediation; moving away from the medical model perspective; a focus on mental health and clients' strengths, resources, and abilities rather than psychopathology and clients' disabilities; and holism, spirituality, wellness, multiculturalism, and social justice. Adler's 1933 paper on striving and social interest alludes to several of the emphases listed above.

Cowen and Kilmer (2002) criticized the positive psychology literature for its lack of attention to prior literature regarding prevention and wellness, its lack of a cohesive undergirding theoretical framework, and its lack of a developmental perspective. Adlerian theory has a rich literature addressing prevention and healthy development, and could serve as a useful cohesive theoretical framework that Cowen and Kilmer indicated is lacking in positive psychology.

Adlerian psychology is a growth model that emphasizes the holistic, phenomenological, teleological, field-theoretically, and socially-embedded aspects of human functioning. It is an optimistic perspective that views people as unique, creative, capable, and responsible. Adlerians disdain the deficit or "medical model" orientation to maladjustment, preferring a nonpathological perspective. Thus, clients are not sick (as in having a disease) and are not identified or "labeled" by their diagnoses. Because Adlerians believe the growth model of personality makes more sense than the sickness model, they see clients as discouraged rather than sick. Thus, Adlerians are not about "curing" anything; therapy is a process of *encouragement*. In fact, Adlerians consider encouragement a crucial aspect of human growth and

development (Carlson et al., 2006; Manaster & Corsini, 1982; Mosak & Maniacci, 1999; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000).

Adlerian therapists focus on developing a respectful, egalitarian, optimistic, and growth-oriented therapeutic alliance that emphasizes clients' assets, abilities, resources and strengths. Watts (1998) noted that Adler's descriptions of therapist-modeled social interest look very similar to Rogers's descriptions of the core facilitative conditions of client change; congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding. The above qualities and characteristics of the therapeutic alliance are embedded in what Adlerians have historically called encouragement, or *the therapeutic modeling of social interest* (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999; Watts, 1998; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000). Stressing the importance of encouragement in therapy, Adler (1956) stated: "Altogether, in every step of the treatment, we must not deviate from the path of encouragement" (p. 342). In addition, Dreikurs (1967) stated that therapeutic success was largely dependent upon "(the therapist's) ability to provide encouragement" and failure generally occurred "due to the inability of the therapist to encourage" (pp. 12-13). Encouragement skills include demonstrating concern for clients through active listening and empathy, communicating respect for and confidence in clients, focusing on clients' strengths, assets, and resources, helping clients generate perceptual alternatives for discouraging fictional beliefs, focusing on efforts and progress, and helping clients see the humor in life experiences (Carlson et al., 2006; Watts & Pietrzak, 2000).

Adler and many subsequent Adlerian have focused on prevention rather than simply remediation and, consequently, they have been extensively involved in education. Throughout his career, Adler was actively involved in public health, medical and psychological prevention, and social welfare. He wrote, lectured on, and advocated for children at risk, women's rights and the equality of the sexes, women's rights to abortion, adult education, teacher training, community mental health, family counseling and education and the establishment of family counseling clinics, experimental schools for public students, and brief psychotherapy. Adlerians have continued Adler's emphasis on prevention and education. For example, they have been perhaps the strongest proponents of child guidance and parent and family education, and have written extensively on parent and family education, couple-enrichment, and teacher education (Carlson et al., 2006; Mosak & Maniacci, 1999; Oberst & Stewart, 2003; Watts, 2012).

Conclusion

As noted earlier, the basic tenets of Adlerian theory and therapy permeate contemporary psychology, typically without acknowledgement of Adler's pioneering influence (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999; Watts, 1999; Watts & Critelli, 1997). This appears to be evident in the positive psychology literature as well. Seligman (2002), considered the "Father of Positive Psychology," stated: "I well recognize that positive psychology is not a new idea. It has many distinguished ancestors" (p. 7).

The two examples he mentions are Gordon Allport and Abraham Maslow. I can find no evidence of Seligman ever acknowledging Adler's pioneering positive psychology. Adler clearly addressed key positive psychology tenets long before the "ancestors" (e.g., Allport, Maslow, Rogers) typically identified in the positive psychology literature (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011). Thus, I believe that Adler's Individual Psychology is the original positive psychology in the modern psychology and psychotherapy era. Adlerian theory is clearly relevant for today's psychological zeitgeist because it evinced the characteristics of positive psychology long before the emergence of the positive psychology movement.

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