

Individual Psychology

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Riley Hoffman

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Alfred Adler's individual psychology views the person as an indivisible, whole being whose personality is shaped by an innate drive to overcome feelings of inferiority and strive for success or superiority, all within a crucial social context.

It emphasizes that our core beliefs and behaviors (our unique style of life) are goal-directed and developed in early childhood, especially by our family dynamics, like birth order, and our capacity for social interest.

Key Takeaways

- **Humans are motivated by** social connectedness and striving for superiority or success. This means people seek meaningful relationships and want to feel competent and valued.
- **Feelings of inferiority** drive individuals to achieve personal goals. These feelings push people to improve themselves and overcome challenges.
- **Early interactions** with family, peers, and adults shape feelings of inferiority and superiority. Our relationships during childhood influence how confident or insecure we feel later in life.
- **Birth order** significantly influences personality and feelings of inferiority. For example, firstborns may feel responsible, while youngest children might struggle for attention.
- **All behavior is goal-oriented**, with individuals differing in their goals and methods. Everyone works toward personal aims, but what they want and how they act varies greatly.
- **Compensation** is a healthy response to inferiority, involving efforts to develop abilities. People naturally try to build skills or strengths to counteract their weaknesses.
- **Failure to compensate** leads to an inferiority complex. When people can't overcome their doubts, they may feel stuck or overwhelmed by insecurity.

- **Adlerian therapy** aims to help patients overcome feelings of inferiority. The goal is to build confidence and encourage healthier, goal-focused behaviors.





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Get updates on the latest posts and more from Simply Psychology straight to your inbox. Individual Psychology is a theory developed by Alfred Adler that focuses on the idea that people are primarily motivated by a need for social connection and a drive to overcome feelings of inferiority.

According to Adler, everyone experiences some sense of not being good enough, which pushes them to set personal goals and strive for success or superiority in their own way.

Early relationships, especially within the family, shape how these feelings of inferiority or superiority develop.

Adler also believed that birth order plays a key role in personality development.

A healthy response to feeling inferior is compensation, working to build strengths and abilities.

But if someone can't overcome these feelings, they may develop an inferiority complex.

The aim of Adlerian therapy is to help people recognize and overcome these feelings so they can lead more confident and fulfilling lives.

Compensation, Overcompensation, and Complexes

Adler thought that the basic psychological element of [neurosis](#) was a sense of inferiority and that individuals suffering with the symptoms of this phenomenon spent their lives trying to overcome the feelings without ever being in touch with reality (White, 1917)

Compensation for Weaknesses

Compensation is a concept from Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology that explains how people naturally respond to feelings of weakness or inferiority.

When someone feels they're lacking in some area, whether real or imagined, they try to make up for it by developing other skills or strengths.

For example, a person who feels shy might work hard to become a great listener or develop talents in art or sports.

This process helps individuals build confidence and achieve personal growth.

However, if someone is unable to compensate, they may develop an inferiority complex, feeling stuck or overwhelmed by their weaknesses.

Overall, compensation is a healthy and natural way to overcome challenges and improve oneself.

Overcompensation

Overcompensation happens when someone tries too hard to cover up their feelings of inferiority or weakness, often by exaggerating certain behaviors or achievements.

Instead of simply improving or balancing their weaknesses, they might act overly confident, arrogant, or aggressive to hide their insecurity.

For example, a person who feels inadequate might boast excessively or take unnecessary risks to prove themselves.

While compensation is a healthy way to grow, overcompensation can actually create new problems and make the original feelings of inferiority worse.

Understanding overcompensation helps people recognize these patterns and work toward healthier self-esteem.

Inferiority Complex

An inferiority complex is when someone feels so overwhelmed by their sense of weakness or inadequacy that it starts to affect their daily life.

These feelings have two parts:

1. **Primary inferiority**: the real or perceived weaknesses a person has.
2. **Secondary inferiority**: emotional reactions, like shame or anxiety, that comes from focusing too much on those weaknesses.

Instead of just feeling a little less confident, these feelings become persistent and stop them from reaching their goals or enjoying life.

They might avoid challenges or feel they're not good enough no matter what they do.

Recognizing an inferiority complex is the first step toward building healthier confidence and self-worth.



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Superiority Complex

A superiority complex is when someone acts overly confident or arrogant to cover up feelings of inferiority.

Instead of facing their weaknesses, they try to appear better than others, sometimes putting people down or boasting to hide their insecurities.

This behavior is a way to protect their self-esteem but can actually push others away and create new problems.

It's basically a mask for deeper feelings of not feeling good enough.

Adler (2013a) claims that superiority complexes are born out of inferiority complexes; they are “one of the ways which a person with an inferiority complex may use a method of escape from his difficulties” (p. 97).

Personality Typology, or Styles of Life

Adler did not approve of the concept of personality types; he believed this practice could lead to neglecting each individual's uniqueness.

However, he did recognize patterns that often formed in childhood and could be useful in treating patients who fit into them.

He called these patterns styles of life.

Adler (2013a) claimed that once a psychologist knows a person's style of life, “it is possible to predict his future sometimes just on the basis of talking to him and having him answer questions” (p. 100)

Adler and his followers analyze a person's style of life by comparing it to “the socially adjusted human being” (p. 101).

Birth Order

The term birth order refers to the order in which the children of a family were born. Adler (2013b, pp. 150-155) believed that birth order had a significant and predictable impact on a child's personality:

First-born

First-born children have inherent advantages due to their parents recognizing them as “the larger, the stronger, the older.”

This gives first-born children the traits of “a guardian of law and order.”

These children have a high amount of personal power, and they value the concept of power with reverence.



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Second-born

Second-born children are constantly in the shadow of their older siblings.

They are incessantly “striving for superiority under pressure,” driven by the existence of their older, more powerful sibling.

If the second-born is encouraged and supported, he will be able to attain power as well, and he and the first-born will work together.

Youngest Child

Youngest children operate in a constant state of inferiority.

They are constantly trying to prove themselves, due to their perceptions of inferiority relative to the rest of their family.

According to Adler, there are two types of youngest children.

The more successful type “excels every other member of the family, and becomes the family’s most capable member.”

Another, more unfortunate type of youngest child does not excel because he lacks the necessary self-confidence. This child becomes evasive and avoidant towards the rest of the family.

Only Child

Only children, according to Adler, are also an unfortunate case.

Due to their being the sole object of their parent's attention, the only child becomes "dependent to a high degree, constantly waits for someone to show him the way, and searches for support at all times."

They also come to see the world as a hostile place due to their parents' constant vigilance.

Critical Evaluation

As with all psychodynamic approaches to human psychology, Adlerian individual psychology receives criticism for being unscientific and difficult to prove empirically.

Specifically, its focus on the unconscious fictive goal makes it arguable that Adlerian psychology is unfalsifiable.

Though Adler's theories are difficult to definitively prove, recent [neuroscience](#) has provided some support.



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A recent study summarizing modern neuroscientific evidence, and how it relates to Adlerian psychology, agreed with a statement made by Maslow in 1970:

“Adler becomes more and more correct year by year. As the facts come in, they give stronger and stronger support to his image of man” (Miller & Dillman Taylor, 2016, p. 125).

In regards to Adlerian therapy, the modern-day attitude is that while the practice is simple and easy for the layman to understand, it is flawed because it is not empirically based.

Adler’s form of counseling is criticized for its lack of depth, notably, its lack of a foundation that deals with issues not related to concepts such as birth order and early recollections (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2016, p. 142).

How did Adler Disagree with Freud?

Aspect	Sigmund Freud	Alfred Adler
Motivation of Behavior	Internal biological drives (sex and aggression)	Social influence and striving for superiority
Choice in Personality Development	People have no choice	People are responsible for who they are
Behavior Influence	Present behavior is caused by the past (e.g. childhood)	Present behavior is shaped by the future (goals orientation)
Conscious Awareness	Emphasis on unconscious processes	People are aware of what they are doing and why
Personality Structure	Split into components (id, ego, superego)	Studied as a whole (holism)
Primary Relationships	Relationship with same-sex parent	Wider family relationships including with siblings

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