

## **Alfred Adler: Individual Psychology**

### **Summary Outline**

#### **I. Overview of Adler's Individual Psychology**

Adler was an original member of Freud's psychoanalytic group, but he never saw himself as a disciple or a follower of Freud. In fact, throughout his life he carried with him the note Freud had sent to him proposing the establishment of an organization of physicians. Adler saw the invitation as Freud's recognition of Adler as an equal. After Adler broke from that group, he built a theory of personality that was nearly diametrically opposed to that of Freud. Whereas Freud's view of humanity was pessimistic and rooted in biology, Adler's view was optimistic, idealistic, and rooted in family experiences.

#### **II. Biography of Alfred Adler**

Alfred Adler was born in 1870 in a Viennese suburb, a second son of middle-class Jewish parents. Like Freud, Adler was a physician, and in 1902, he became a charter member of Freud's organization. However, personal and professional differences between the two men led to Adler's departure from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1911. Adler soon founded his own group, the Society for **Individual Psychology**. Adler's strengths were his energetic oral presentations and his insightful ability to understand family dynamics. He was not a gifted writer, a limitation that may have prevented him from attaining world recognition equal to that of Freud.

#### **III. Introduction to Adlerian Theory**

Although Adler's individual psychology is both complex and comprehensive, its main tenets can be stated in simple form.

#### **IV. Striving for Success or Superiority**

The sole dynamic force behind people's actions is the striving for success or superiority.

##### **A. The Final Goal**

The final goal of success or superiority toward which all people strive unifies personality and makes all behavior meaningful.

##### **B. The Striving Force as Compensation**

Because people are born with small, inferior bodies, they feel inferior and attempt to overcome these feelings through their natural tendency to move toward completion. The striving force can take one of two courses—personal gain (superiority) or community benefit (success).

##### **C. Striving for Personal Superiority**

Psychologically unhealthy individuals strive for personal superiority with little concern for other people. Although they may appear to be interested in other people, their basic motivation is personal benefit.

##### **D. Striving for Success**

In contrast, psychologically healthy people strive for the success of all humanity, but they do so without losing their personal identity.

#### **V. Subjective Perceptions**

People's subjective view of the world—not reality—shapes their behavior.

##### **A. Fictionalism**

Fictions are people's expectations of the future. Adler held that fictions guide behavior, because people act as if these fictions are true. Adler emphasized **teleology** over **causality**, or explanations of behavior in terms of future goals rather than past causes.

##### **B. Physical Inferiorities**

Adler believed that all humans are "blessed" with physical inferiorities, which stimulate subjective feelings of inferiority and move people toward perfection or completion.

#### **VI. Unity and Self-Consistency of Personality**

Adler believed that all behaviors are directed toward a single purpose. When seen in the light of that sole purpose, seemingly contradictory behaviors can be seen as operating in a self-consistent manner.

##### **A. Organ Dialect**

People often use a physical disorder to express style of life, a condition Adler called **organ dialect**, or organ jargon.

##### **B. Conscious and Unconscious**

Conscious and unconscious processes are unified and operate to achieve a single goal. The part of our goal that is not clearly understood is unconscious; that part of our goal we fail to fully comprehend is conscious.

#### **VII. Social Interest**

Human behavior has value to the extent that it is motivated by **social interest**, that is, a feeling of oneness with all of humanity.

##### **A. Origins of Social Interest**

Although social interest exists as potentiality in all people, it must be fostered in a social environment. Adler believed that the parent-child relationship can be so strong that it negates the effects of heredity.

##### **B. Importance of Social Interest**

According to Adler, social interest is "the sole criterion of human values," and the worthiness of all one's actions must be seen by this standard. Without social interest, societies could not exist; individuals in antiquity could not have survived without cooperating with others to protect themselves from danger. Even today an infant's helplessness predisposes it toward a nurturing person.

#### **VIII. Style of Life**

The manner of a person's striving is called **style of life**, a pattern that is relatively well set by 4 or 5 years of age. However, Adler believed that healthy individuals are marked by flexible behavior and that they have some limited ability to change their style of life.

## **IX.Creative Power**

Style of life is partially a product of heredity and environment—the building blocks of personality—but ultimately style of life is shaped by people's **creative power**, that is, by their ability to freely choose a course of action.

## **X.Abnormal Development**

Creative power is not limited to healthy people; unhealthy individuals also create their own personalities. Thus, each of us is free to choose either a useful or a useless style of life.

### **A. General Description**

The most important factor in abnormal development is lack of social interest. In addition, people with a useless style of life tend to (1) set their goals too high, (2) have a dogmatic style of life, and (3) live in their own private world.

### **B. External Factors in Maladjustment**

Adler listed three factors that relate to abnormal development: (1) **exaggerated physical defects**, which do not by themselves cause abnormal development, but which may contribute to it by generating subjective and exaggerated feelings of inferiority; (2) **a pampered style of life**, which contributes to an overriding drive to establish a permanent parasitic relationship with the mother or a mother substitute; and (3) **a neglected style of life**, which leads to distrust of other people.

### **C. Safeguarding Tendencies**

Both normal and neurotic people create symptoms as a means of protecting their fragile self-esteem. These **safeguarding tendencies** maintain a neurotic life style and protect a person from public disgrace. The three principal safeguarding tendencies are (1) **excuses**, which allow people to preserve their inflated sense of personal worth; (2) **aggression**, which may take the form of **depreciating** others' accomplishments, **accusing** others of being responsible for one's own failures, or **self-accusation**; and (3) **withdrawal**, which can be expressed by psychologically **moving backward, standing still, hesitating, or constructing obstacles**

### **D. Masculine Protest**

Both men and women sometimes overemphasize the desirability of being manly, a condition Adler called the **masculine protest**. The frequently found inferior status of women is not based on physiology but on historical developments and social learning. Boys are often taught early that being masculine means being courageous, strong, and dominant. The ultimate accomplishment for boys is to win, to be powerful, to be on top. In contrast, girls often learn to be passive and to accept an inferior position in society. In contrast to Adler's more democratic attitude, Freud believed that anatomy is destiny and that women occupy the 'dark continent' of psychology. Near the end of his life, Freud was still asking what women wanted. According to Adler, Freud's attitudes toward women would be evidence of a person with a strong masculine protest. In contrast to Freud's views on women, Adler assumed that women—because

they have the same physiological and psychological needs as men—want more or less the same things that men want.

## **XI.Applications of Individual Psychology**

Adler applied the principles of individual psychology to family constellation, early recollections, dreams, and psychotherapy.

### **A. Family Constellation**

Adler believed that people's perception of how they fit into their family is related to their style of life. He claimed that firstborns are likely to have strong feelings of power and superiority, to be overprotective, and to have more than their share of anxiety. Secondborn children (such as Adler) are likely to have strong social interest, provided they do not get trapped trying to overcome their older sibling. Youngest children are likely to be pampered and to lack independence, whereas only children have some of the characteristics of both the oldest and the youngest child.

### **B. Early Recollections**

A more reliable method of determining style of life is to ask people for their earliest recollections. Adler believed that early memories are templates on which people project their current style of life. These recollections need not be accurate accounts of early event, but true or false, they have psychological importance because they reflect a person's current view of the world.

### **C. Dreams**

Adler believed that dreams can provide clues to solving future problems. However, dreams are disguised to deceive the dreamer and usually must be interpreted by another person.

### **D. Psychotherapy**

The goal of Adlerian therapy is to create a relationship between therapist and patient that fosters social interest. To ensure that the patient's social interest will eventually generalize to other relationships, the therapist adopts both a maternal and a paternal role.

## **XII.Related Research**

Although family constellation and birth order have been widely researched, topics more pertinent to Adlerian theory are early recollections and career choice. For example, research by Jon Kasler and Ofra Nevo (2005) found that early childhood recollections did match career types in adulthood, which is consistent with Adler's view.

Adler's theory of inferiority, superiority, and social feeling can be applied to health-related behaviors such as eating disorders and binge drinking. For example, Susan Belangee (2006) found that dieting, overeating, and bulimia are unhealthy ways of compensating for feelings of inferiority. Moreover, eating disorders suggest that a person's *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* or social feeling is out of whack. Recently, Teresa Laird and Andrea Shelton (2006) examined binge drinking and birth order among college students. They found youngest children in a family significantly more likely to binge drink than older children. The researchers explained this using Adlerian theory, in that youngest children are more likely to be

dependent, and dependent people are more likely to cope with stress by heavy drinking.

Some evidence exists that early recollections change through the course of counseling. For example, Gary Savill and Daniel Eckstein (1987) found significant changes in both mental status and early recollections for a therapy group, but not for people in a control group. Similarly, Jane Statton and Bobbie Wilborn (1991) found that recollections of preadolescent children changed after receiving therapy, whereas those of a control group did not. These results tend to support Adler's teleological approach to personality, in that early childhood experiences are less important than adults' views of those experiences.

### XIII.Critique of Adlerian Theory

Individual psychology rates high on its ability to generate research, organize data, and guide the practitioner. It receives a moderate rating on parsimony, but because it lacks operational definitions, it rates low on internal consistency. It also rates low on falsification because many of its related research findings can be explained by other theories.

### XIV.Concept of Humanity

Adler saw people as forward moving, social animals who are motivated by goals they set (both consciously and unconsciously) for the future. People are ultimately responsible for their own unique style of life. Thus, Adler's theory rates high on free-choice, social influences, and uniqueness; very high on optimism and teleology; and average on unconscious influences.

#### Multiple Choice

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. As a child, Adler had an intense rivalry with \_\_\_\_\_.

- a.his mother.
- b.his father.
- c.an older brother named Sigmund.
- d.an older sister named Anna.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. For more than 30 years, Adler carried an invitation from \_\_\_\_\_ suggesting that these two men should combine with other physicians to establish the Wednesday Psychological Society.

- a.Sigmund Freud
- b.Carl Jung
- c.his wife
- d.William James

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Individual Psychology can be considered to be

- a.deterministic.
- b.optimistic
- c.pessimistic.
- d.neo-Freudian.
- e.none of these.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. To Adler, the one dynamic force behind a person's activity is

- a. the striving for success or superiority.
- b.organ inferiorities.
- c.organ dialect.
- d.feelings of superiority.

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. According to Adler, a person's final goal is

a.set at about age 18.

b.a creation of the creative power.

c.death.

d.shaped by heredity and environment.

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Adler insisted that personality is shaped by

a.subjective perceptions.

b.birth-order.

c.early childhood experiences.

d.organ inferiorities.

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. According to Adler, ideas that have no real existence, yet influence individuals as if they really existed, are called

a.fictions.

b.fabrications.

c.hypotheses.

d.postulates.

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. The doctrine that motivation should be considered according to its final purpose or aim is called

a.fictional imperative.

b.*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*.

c.causation.

d.teleology.

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. Adler believed that organ inferiorities

a.cause superiority personalities.

b.cause inferiority personalities.

c.bestow meaning and purpose on all behavior.

d.stimulate feelings of inferiority.

\_\_\_\_\_ 10. *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* is usually translated as

a.style of life.

b.fictional finalism.

c.social interest.

d.organ inferiority.

\_\_\_\_\_ 11. According to Adler \_\_\_\_\_, the "sole criterion of human values" would be

a.social interest.

b.productive work.

c.self-interest.

d.religion.

\_\_\_\_\_ 12. A person's final goal is ultimately shaped by

a.heredity.

b.early childhood experiences.

c.the superego.

d.the creative power.

\_\_\_\_\_ 13. People strive toward superiority through one of two paths. One is the route of social interest; the other is the road of

a.success.

b.individuation.

c.exaggerated personal gain.

d.submission.

\_\_\_ 14. Adler held that people are continually pushed by the need to overcome inferiority feelings and pulled by the desire for

- a. love.
- b. *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*
- c. food and sex.
- d. completion.

\_\_\_ 15. To Adler, the core of maladjustment is

- a. innate physical deficiencies.
- b. lack of social interest.
- c. a pampered style of life.
- d. a neglected style of life.

\_\_\_ 16. Early recollections are

- a. easily verified by talking to parents or older siblings.
- b. keys to understanding one's present style of life.
- c. usually unpleasant and traumatic.
- d. the cause of one's style of life.

\_\_\_ 17. According to Adler, the creative power

- a. usually leads to outstanding accomplishments.
- b. shapes one's style of life.
- c. is a deterministic concept.
- d. is secondary to heredity and environment in shaping personality.

\_\_\_ 18. Adler believed that the goals of a pathological person

- a. are exaggerated and unrealistic.
- b. are easily reached.
- c. both of these.
- d. neither of these.

\_\_\_ 19. Pampered children

- a. frequently feel neglected.
- b. have received too much love.
- c. become productive contributions to society.
- d. none of these.

\_\_\_ 20. Adlerian safeguarding tendencies are

- a. sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious.
- b. completely conscious.
- c. completely unconscious.
- d. used only by neurotics.

\_\_\_ 21. Safeguarding tendencies protect exaggerated feelings of superiority against

- a. anxiety.
- b. guilt.
- c. public disgrace.
- d. an uncontrollable id.

\_\_\_ 22. Compared with Freud, Adler

- a. had a more positive view toward women.
- b. placed more emphasis on aggression.
- c. relied more on dream interpretation during psychotherapy.
- d. was more likely to use hypnosis to treat patients.

\_\_\_ 23. Style of life is most reliably revealed by

- a. the word association test.
- b. hypnosis.
- c. dream interpretation.
- d. early recollections.

\_\_\_ 24. According to Adler, dreams

- a. can be interpreted only by the dreamer.
- b. express childhood sexual fantasies.
- c. provide information for dealing with future problems.
- d. can foretell the future.

\_\_\_ 25. According to Adler, human personality is

- a. the result of the interaction of heredity and environment.
- b. determined by people's experiences with frustration and conflict.
- c. shaped by people's interpretations of experiences.
- d. motivated by a complexity and multiplicity of drives and needs.

\_\_\_ 26. The ultimate goal of Adlerian therapy is to

- a. reduce needless anxiety.
- b. increase self-confidence.
- c. increase social interest.
- d. decrease safeguarding tendencies.

\_\_\_ 27. Research suggests that early recollections

- a. may change during the course of psychotherapy.
- b. are not consistent with scores on current personality inventories.
- c. have little or no usefulness to the clinician.
- d. tend to remain unchanged while personality changes.

\_\_\_ 28. A major weakness of Adler's theory is that it

- a. is not easily falsifiable.
- b. has failed to generate much research.
- c. is anti-Freudian.
- d. cannot explain inconsistencies in behavior.

\_\_\_ 29. In his concept of humanity, Adler saw people as

- a. destined for a life of conflict and chaos.
- b. being driven by security and safety.
- c. determined mostly by environmental factors.
- d. determined mostly by genetic factors.
- e. none of these.

#### Answer Key

- |      |      |      |
|------|------|------|
| 1.c  | 11.a | 21.c |
| 2.a  | 12.d | 22.a |
| 3.b  | 13.c | 23.d |
| 4.a  | 14.d | 24.c |
| 5.b  | 15.b | 25.c |
| 6.a  | 16.b | 26.c |
| 7.a  | 17.b | 27.a |
| 8.d  | 18.a | 28.a |
| 9.d  | 19.a | 29.e |
| 10.c | 20.a |      |