

Adler as a Sherlockian

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Mosak (1973) has presented several testimonies from noted Adlerians that alluded to the influence literature had on Adler's writings. Powers (Mosak, 1973) presented a quotation by Adler that seemed to summarize the contribution literature has made to Adlerian psychology:

Our knowledge of the individual is very old. To name only a few instances, the historical and personality descriptions of the ancient peoples, the Bible, Homer, Plutarch, all the Greek and Roman poets, sagas, fairy tales, and myths, show a brilliant understanding of personality. Until recent time it was chiefly the poets who best succeeded in getting the clue to a person's lifestyle. Their ability to show the individual living, acting, and dying as an *indivisible* whole in closest context with tasks of his sphere of life rouses our admiration for their work to the highest degree. (p. 274)

One fictional character who devoted his life to obtaining clues to various people's lifestyles was Sherlock Holmes. Truzzi and Morris (1971) related to the appeal Sherlock Holmes has for the psychologist when they said:

The Sherlock Holmes adventures are a primer in scientific method as applied to human problems . . . Many social scientists find a special fascination in the tales of Sherlock Holmes. Perhaps it is because, to them, Holmes epitomizes the ultimate scientist, the highest advance of man's faculty, the power of reason. (p. 62)

From the viewpoint of a psychotherapist, I have found the writings on Sherlock Holmes to be relevant to the strategies of Alfred Adler. While reading through the 56 short stories and 4 novels that comprise *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 1930), I have often been able to identify with Holmes. One example was in *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* when Watson noted:

When I arrived at Baker Street, I found him huddled up in his armchair with up-drawn knees, his pipe in his mouth, and his brow furrowed with thought. It was clear that he was in the throes of some vexatious problem. With a wave of his hand, he indicated my old armchair. (Doyle, 1930, p. 1071)

The problems that Holmes pondered extended beyond the boundaries of criminology as Watson aptly attested to in *The Adventures of the Veiled Lodger*:

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When one considers that Mr. Sherlock Holmes was in active practice for 23 years, and that during 17 of those I was allowed to cooperate with him and to keep notes of his doings, it will be clear that I have a mass of material at my command. The problem has always been not to find but to choose. There is the long row of yearbooks which fill a shelf, and there are the dispatch-cases filled with documents, a perfect quarry for the student not only of crime but of the social and official scandals of the late Victorian era. (p. 1,095)

As Holmes applied his intricate style of reasoning to these various cases, the master detective also became the master psychologist. In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, Holmes demonstrated the classical procedures of psychological investigation—problem, hypothesis, experiment, and result. The *problem* was that the beautiful Irene Adler (“the woman” to Holmes) had hidden a photograph she was using to blackmail the King of Bohemia. Holmes *hypothesized* that:

When a woman thinks that her house is on fire, her instinct is at once to rush to the thing she values the most. It is a perfectly overpowering impulse A married woman grabs at her baby; an unmarried one reaches for her jewelbox. (p. 173)

To conduct his *experiment*, Holmes instructed Watson to release a smoke rocket to simulate a fire while Holmes watched the movements of Irene Adler. As expected, the *results* confirmed his hypothesis, for Holmes saw Adler take the photograph from a recess behind a sliding panel.

Apart from the seemingly coincidental reference to Irene Adler, Holmes’ and Adler’s methods of analysis often appear similar. Mosak and Dreikurs (Corsini, 1973) seemed to support this notion when they stated that the role of the therapist is similar to that of a detective: “He follows up clues, juxtaposes them in patterns, accepts some hypotheses, and rejects others in his efforts to understand the patient. As therapy progresses, the patient offers information one way or another, and the therapist pieces it together bit by bit like a jigsaw puzzle” (p. 56). Obviously, therapists from various orientations (e.g., Freudian) also proceed in psychotherapy through roles similar to that of a detective.

From an Adlerian perspective, there appear to be three dimensions to a lifestyle analysis that tend to follow the patterns of a Sherlockian-type detective.

Dimension 1: Following Up Clues

Sherlock Holmes’ and Alfred Adler’s approaches to data collection (following up clues) have some commonalities. Both investigators proceeded inductively from a holistic, phenomenological perspective. Such conclusions can be drawn by comparing the fundamental attitudes that both Holmes and Adler maintain in the inquirer’s role.

The Science of Induction

Sherlock Holmes often credited his deductive processes for providing insight into a problem. Contrary to Holmes' contention, Sherlockians Truzzi and Morris (1971) concluded that many of Holmes' "deductions" were actually inductions:

In deduction one starts with two premises—a general rule and a specific case—and infers a result that must be true if the premises are true. For example, if it is true that "A doctor stationed in the tropical climate of Afghanistan would have a dark face and fair wrists" and that "Dr. Watson has been stationed in Afghanistan," then it follows with absolute certainty that Watson's face is dark and his wrists are fair.

This is deductive reasoning, and Sherlock Holmes rarely used it. He already knew that Watson had a dark face and fair wrists—he was interested in reasoning backward, toward the probable causes.

Holmes was thereby using an inductive process.

Induction involves reasoning from specific cases to general rules And it is similar to what the social scientist does when he seeks laws of behavior. (p. 62)

So it appears that Holmes relied primarily on inductive processes to follow up on the various clues associated with a case. The Adlerian lifestyle analysis procedure also follows an inductive pattern. During a lifestyle analysis, the Adlerian pieces together information (clues) obtained from analysis of the family constellation and early memories to produce a general picture of the client (Corsini, 1973).

A Holistic, Phenomenological Perspective

Holmes' and Adler's methods of observing clues (data) were from a holistic, phenomenological perspective. For example, in *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes related through a holistic perspective when he commented: "One's ideas must be as broad as nature if they are to interpret nature." Like Adler, Holmes observed a phenomenon as a unit—everything being interrelated. This phenomenon was apparent in *The Adventures of the Copper Beeches* when Holmes cried impatiently: "Data! data! data! I can't make bricks without clay" (Doyle, 1930, p. 322).

Holmes and Adler were also aware that one's observations could be biased by past experiences. Adler referred to this phenomenon as *apperception*. Holmes apparently was using a phenomenological orientation when he noted: "I make a point of never having any prejudices and of following docilely wherever facts may lead me" (*The Reigate Puzzle*, Doyle, 1930, p. 407). Adler guarded against his prejudices when he warned: "The psychotherapist must lose all thought of himself and all sensitiveness about his

ascendancy and must never demand anything of the patient” (Adler, 1964, p. 73).

Dimension 2: Juxtapose the Clues

Sherlock Holmes and Alfred Adler were experts at using the law of probability to turn educative guesses into a form of scientific inquiry. Through their process of guessing, Holmes and Adler would often set one hypothesis against another or compare a theoretical construct to an actual observation as they juxtaposed the clues. In *The Adventure of Black Peter*, Holmes appeared to be setting one hypothesis against the other when he said, “One should always look for a possible alternative and provide against it The line of investigation which I have myself been pursuing. It may give us nothing. I cannot tell. But at least I shall follow it to the end” (p. 567).

Dreikurs (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1973) commented that Adler frankly admitted to using guessing in order to understand a case history. In doing so, Dreikurs believed that “Adler demonstrated that we can learn to guess in the right direction. Adler opened our eyes to the underlying possibilities of small facts which remain insignificant unless we sense their wider implications” (p. 143). An example of an Adlerian attempting to guess in the right direction was when Dreikurs (1969) tried to describe to a mother the personality characteristics of her children without ever meeting her children. In a sense, Dreikurs was juxtaposing the clues by comparing the probability of various birth-order characteristics with the actual personality characteristics of the client.

Dimension 3: Accept Some Hypotheses, Reject Others

Sherlock Holmes and Alfred Adler were both aware that they could guess in the wrong direction as they juxtaposed the clues. As with most investigators, they relied on verbal feedback to confirm or reject their hypotheses. Since both figures amassed a reputation for probing beyond the superficial, it is not surprising that they also developed more complex skills of observation. Most Adlerians were familiar with the use of recognition reflexes as a means of confirming or rejecting an hypothesis.¹

Adler (1964) related to the importance of nonverbal communication when he said, “It is natural for an individual to express himself with his whole body, so that it is often more instructive to watch a person’s movements—how he walks, sits, smiles, or fidgets than to hear what he says” (p. 63). In *The Cardboard Box*, Holmes also was keenly aware of the importance that nonverbal clues played in understanding behavior as he interacted with Watson:

1. Refer to Mosak (1972, p. 235) for an illustration of the use of recognition reflexes in a lifestyle analysis.

"The features are given to man as the means by which he shall express his emotions, and yours are faithful servants."

"Do you mean to say that you read my train of thoughts from my features?"

"Your features, and especially your eyes." (p. 889)

Conclusion

As an Adlerian, my interpretations and insights (e.g., three dimensions to a lifestyle analysis) were naturally from an Adlerian perspective. Therapists from other orientations (e.g., Jungian) could no doubt make additional or possibly even similar analogies.

Within this paper, I have attempted to present an example of how the roads of literature cross with those of Adlerian psychology. Carnicelli (Mosak, 1973) seemed to capture this spirit by noting the following quote of Adler:

Some day soon it will be realized that the artist is the leader of mankind on the path to the absolute truth. Among poetic works of art which have led me to the insights of Individual Psychology the following stand out as pinnacles: fairy tales, the Bible, Shakespeare, and Goethe. (p. 291)

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