

# Adlerian Psychology on Focus: An Interview with Dr. Thomas Edgar

*Thomas Edgar*

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**Nield:** Why isn't Adler accepted or even considered in some personality theory courses on university campuses?

**Edgar:** There are many reasons. One is, of course, that historically he was just overshadowed by a giant, Sigmund Freud. Another reason is that Adler's theory requires a lot of personal commitment and asks people to accept personal responsibility for their own behavior in a way that most theories do not. Also, Adler's thought was not directed at professionals. You know, psychologists in many ways are the high priests of our day. They are instrumental in helping us decide the nature of people, and they fulfill a role in our society previously performed by magicians and priests. Adler never talked to psychologists very much. Instead, he spoke to people, to common folks. He always felt psychology should be available to everyday people with everyday problems and that there shouldn't be a jargon or a special language. So I think that many psychologists, professionals, and psychology teachers have ignored Adler largely because he ignored them.

**Torres:** Dr. Edgar, why is there a resurgence of Adlerian psychology now?

**Edgar:** I think we are going through a social revolution. For the first time in the history of our country, in a very serious way, we are trying to extend democracy and democratic ideals to people of all kinds: homosexuals, blacks, reds, women, prisoners, etc. We are beginning to believe and perhaps trying to practice the ideal that people should be respected somehow, even if

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they are different from us in sex, color, or sexual preference. Adlerian psychology first, last, and always is a psychology of democratic and cooperative relationships; it may just happen to be consistent with the mood of our times.

**Napier:** Just how much of Adlerian philosophy is Adler's and how much is Dreikurs'?

**Edgar:** That's a tough question. Adler lived a full, long, and productive life. Typical of European psychologists, he thought broadly and he wrote and revised all his life. It's a wide-ranging theory. But, when you try to take that theory and translate it into action, specific practices, there's always the chance of some slippage. Dreikurs wrote what to do and how to practice. *Children: The Challenge* is very practical: here is how to handle bedwetting, and here is what to do about television. It is a good translation of a wide-ranging philosophy and theory into practice. The more you study Adler and the more you look at the practice, the more you are able to see the connection between practice as applied by Dreikurs and theory as offered by Adler. I suspect that Dreikurs, being a pretty strong person, got some Dreikurs in there, too. I'm sure he didn't just copy or mimic.

**Nield:** Didn't Dreikurs always claim that he was Adlerian?

**Edgar:** I think there is some danger in that. Adler didn't say everything that needed to be said, and I'm sure that, had he lived on, he would be revising what he said earlier. So it may be a mistake to try to stay with Adler and say just what Adler said. I don't think that it is an especially good thing to say, "I am strictly an Adlerian." A theory always needs to be reexamined, reconsidered, and revised.

**Napier:** Adlerians talk about people being responsible for their decisions and having a choice, but, at the same time, Mosak talked about typical lifestyles which are formed very early in a child's life. This seems deterministic to me.

**Edgar:** Lifestyle is a collection of convictions about life that you or I hold about ourselves, about other people, and about the world. These convictions or beliefs remain fairly consistent once established because usually we are quite unaware of them. They are, in the Adlerian sense, unconscious. As long as they are unknown, they are not subject to change. Our observations are made within the framework of these convictions. I may be convinced that the only way I can be worthwhile is for people to pay attention to me. One choice I can make within that conviction is that I can go all the way from Pocatello, Idaho, to Pittsburg, Kansas, and sit down in front of a television set and have everybody pay attention to me. Another thing I can do is rob a bank or climb out of a building and threaten suicide, and so have everyone in the

city looking at me. I can become an exhibitionist. The choices are almost limitless. I would say our convictions about life, about people, and about the world are established pretty early and seldom change very much. But within those convictions choices are very wide and can be expanded.

**Torres:** When Adlerians mention mistaken goals, is it implied we need to change the goals?

**Edgar:** I don't think they're mistaken goals. I would have to take Dreikurs to task on this point. I believe Adlerians should talk of mistaken ideas about how to accomplish the goals that all of us hold, that is, to be somebody, to be important, and to make a contribution. And these are not mistaken goals. Many times children and adults seek to move toward these worthwhile goals in mistaken and self-destructive ways due to their faulty ideas or interfering notions.

**Napier:** To translate into rational-emotive terminology, would you say mistaken ideas are irrational ideas?

**Edgar:** Mistaken ideas interfere with one's happiness. Adlerians call them interfering notions. Ellis would probably call them irrational ideas. The typical spoiled and pampered child is one who begins to place demands on the world or on other people. Such children demand that the world be as exactly they want it to be. So they say, "I am worthwhile *only when*" and so they are beginning to say, "I don't like the way God organized the world. I am going to establish rules that are paramount and here are my rules." Here we have an irrational idea. I think all of Ellis' irrational ideas are essentially ideas of the pampered child. These children demand that life meet their standards, and, when it doesn't, then they get upset, depressed, angry, annoyed. In a sense what they are doing is putting themselves above God and saying: "The world as it is does not come quite up to my standards." The Adlerian notion of mistaken or interfering ideas of people are the same as irrational ideas. I believe there are hundreds of the interfering or irrational ideas, although Ellis has listed a few of the most common ones.

**Nield:** How does the notion of private logic apply?

**Edgar:** I believe (and Ellis probably will not agree with this) that the human being is supremely rational. If we understand the way a person views the world and understand his or her private way of reasoning about the world, within those two limits what the individual is doing is supremely rational and very sensible. Now, if all you think about in a situation is your own interest—in other words, you follow your own private logic and your own private interest—intelligent behavior and logical behavior become different things. For example, suppose I would like your purse, what should I do *if all that matters is what I want?* The intelligent thing for me to do is to knock you off the chair

and take your purse. It would be even more intelligent to cut your throat because then you won't be a witness. That's really intelligent *if* in my private logic all that matters is what *I* want. But, if I begin to understand that I am part of the human community and that, what I believe is my right, other people may also consider their right, then stealing your purse becomes quite illogical. If you consider the private logic, the private interest of a person only, it becomes impossible for us to live as human beings together and share the world. This conclusion leads, quite naturally, to Adler's ideas of fellow feeling or social interest. These ideas, in my opinion, are the very cornerstones of Adlerian theory.

**Napier:** How do you develop this social interest?

**Edgar:** A family council. That sounds kind of silly, I guess, but, right from the beginning, help children recognize that each is part of a human system from the moment he or she is born. And what each does has an impact on the rest of the family. The parents must be interested enough to help children learn that if they don't do their chores, other people suffer. The important word is *we*. *We* have a problem. How are *we* going to resolve this issue in the family? How often do you think the typical family sits down together and says, "How are *we* going to solve the problem of unpleasant conversation at the dinner table?" How often do families come together in a situation in which everybody has a chance to pitch in, make a contribution, be considered, and be respected. Very rarely, I fear. Yet this atmosphere is crucial to the extension and development of social interest in each child.

**Napier:** How do Adlerians handle relationships that aren't family or group relationships? For example, marriage or individual clients.

**Edgar:** It's essentially the same basis for marriage counseling and individual counseling. Fundamental to all is the promotion of what is functionally a mutually respectful, cooperative relationship and to identify, in cooperation with the person, the mistaken ideas about life on which she or he is operating. The counselor's job is to help people see clearly their goals of behavior or purposes behind their behavior and then for the counselor to get out of it. Essentially, once I have shown you clearly what you are doing in life and you say, "But that's not what I want in life," you'll change. I don't need to push, coerce, browbeat, confront. All I have to do is help you see what's happening and you will change. It's a human *given* that we will grow toward competency if circumstances are right. Finally, counseling or psychotherapy is mostly to help people understand the interfering ideas they are holding about life and about human relationships. Lifestyle assessment is pretty fundamental to that.

**Torres:** You are depending on the person, that when he sees things he will change.

**Edgar:** One of the fundamental Adlerian beliefs is that people will move from a perceived negative condition in their lives toward a perceived positive condition. One of the explanatory motivations of all life, including human life, is movement forward, upward, growth. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow call it self-actualization. If you open up the circumstances and make it possible, growth will take place. Adlerian psychology follows an education model, incidentally, as opposed to a medical point of view. It's one of the ways that Adler and Freud differed sharply. When you seek out education, you want to change and grow. When you seek out a medical person, you are sick and you want to return to some form or state. Adlerian psychology professes to be and, I think, is an educational way of counseling. It's growth-oriented. Family counseling is held in a public place where everybody can sit down together. The assumption is that the parents just don't have some ideas or knowledge and, if you give them the ideas and knowledge, they will use it and improve their relationships. In essence, counseling is a process which makes greater choice for life available to the client.

**Nield:** Does the encouragement process have anything to do with the insight?

**Edgar:** It's merely critical. Encouragement is the belief (the absolute and fundamental belief) in the ability of the person to be able to resolve his or her own difficulties and to grow. Now, if I have *that* as a fundamental belief about you, that, once you have the information that you need, you will change and become a better, more productive, happier person, then I am encouraging. It may come out in funny ways. I may kick you right in the fanny and say, "Get out of my office. You don't need me. Get out of here and take care of yourself. You're perfectly capable of that." It may come off as sounding cruel or harsh, but it's based on my fundamental belief that you're okay, especially when you're screwing up and right in the very middle of your misery.

**Torres:** I doubt that patients will just automatically change. Don't they need some encouragement to try something different?

**Edgar:** Sure. Nobody's so good that he will change overnight. Although I have observed almost miraculous changes, once interfering ideas become known. One of the reasons I think the Adlerian model for counseling is so useful is that it recognizes that people are holistic, a single, unitary creature. They think. They behave. They perceive. And they feel. *Each* of these is you. And each of these ways is just a mode by which you express totality of your person to the world. Any counseling point of view that works through just one of those four vehicles is wasting three. Any counseling model that just deals with rationality and reason is leaving out three modes by which we live. One that just emphasizes feeling as the principal mode and leaves out reason is probably wasting horsepower. Behaviorists, for example, who want

to simply reduce everything to behavior and then reinforce the appropriate behaviors are leaving out the three other modes. So I think any form of counseling, to be effective, has got to make use of all of those modes of being that exist.

In an Adlerian model, probably one of the things you'll do is help the person behave differently, think differently, feel differently, and perceive differently. The behavior change may require that you give the patient some assignments. You may ask him or her to come back and tell you how it all went. You may sound like a behaviorist sometimes. I think that probably one of the sins we have made is that we have counseling theorists who have pulled apart and are battling each other and saying, "No, no, you're wrong. I'm right." My suggestion to a counselor is: There should be a perpetual individual search to find the personal counseling stance which is broad enough to allow you to serve all aspects of the human being you're trying to work with, through all of the person's modes of expressing him or herself.

**Nield:** Since you're here for a conference meeting with Dr. Krumboltz and Dr. Ellis, is there much similarity between the three approaches to working with people?\*

**Edgar:** I think of Adlerian psychology as being an umbrella or broader point of view under which I very conveniently fit behavioral psychology as an aspect of psychology, which I find I can use within Adlerian psychology. I also am able to fit rational-emotive psychotherapy within Adlerian psychology and refer to that when appropriate. Albert Ellis in his book, *Humanistic Psychotherapy*, has a chapter on the influences of Alfred Adler on rational-emotive psychotherapy. He is intellectually honest and says, in a sense, "What I have done is taken the Adlerian point of view and have developed a technique by which to help people." I find no conflict at all. Matter of fact, I think they are three perfect theories to have at the same conference, because I find them mutually supportive.

**Torres:** Ellis is kind of where Dreikurs was. He's putting into practice some of the things Adler believed in.

**Edgar:** That's essentially it. I'm a member of the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology. My name is Edgar, and the person who is listed immediately after me is Ellis, Albert. I think the guy just simply recognizes the contribution of another man's thinking and his work. The only reason I mention that is to point out that there is no inconsistency or incompatibility in the two points of view. Ellis has paid his dues. I think he has worked hard. He deserves the recognition he gets. I think he's developed his technique to a point where a student can begin to practice RET fairly quickly.

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\*This conference was held at Pittsburgh State University in Pittsburgh, Kansas, June 1977.

But here is a potential danger. A lot of people don't want to be bothered with all the "theoretical crap." All too many want is someone to tell them what to do and how to do it. I think it's too bad if all one becomes is a technician, learning a technique and practicing it without deriving it from a broader theory. If you have the broader theory and you find your technique isn't working, you can return to the theory and generate other techniques. But, if all you have is a technical approach and your technique doesn't work with this person, you're finished. You can just make a referral. Behavioral psychology is essentially a collection of techniques. Once you become good at modifying human behavior, then you have to start to decide some things, like what way is it proper to modify human behavior? Behaviorists especially are in need of a broader theory or a set of principles concerning the "good life." Probably in counselor education programs across this land we regularly confuse techniques of counseling with theories of counseling.