

ADLER'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY

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Evaluating a man's contribution to a given field is always a hazardous assignment. The significance of a person's work often becomes clear only with the passing of time. Has enough time passed to permit an accurate assessment of Alfred Adler's contribution? A great deal depends on the attitude of the observer and analyst, for his own orientation is bound to color the results of his inquiry.

The measure of a man's contribution can be based on three aspects of his activities. First, which influences did he oppose; second, which trends did he reinforce; and third, what were his original contributions, discoveries providing knowledge which previously did not exist? I shall discuss these three areas in my attempt to assess Adler's growing significance, as it may become clearer in the ensuing years.

The influences that Alfred Adler opposed in the field of psychology were so strong that they almost prevented the recognition of Adler's genius and his crucial contributions. First, there was Freud's dominating influence over the psychiatry of his time, psychoanalysis with its incessant search for the deep unconscious processes, and Freud's fundamentally biological and asocial postulations. Freud's followers are trying hard to make us forget the fundamentally anti-social orientation of Sigmund Freud, most clearly expressed in his book, Civilization and Its Discontent (1930). In contrast, Adler reinforced the old concept of man as a social being, a view almost lost in the current tendency to regard man primarily from a biological point of view.

The second opposing force which Adler encountered was even more formidable than that of Freud's psychoanalysis. It was the traditional causalistic-mechanistic orientation of science which adhered to a scientific model developed in the seventeenth century. Adler was 50 years ahead of his time. Both the domination of Freudian influence and the scientific orientation of his time deprived Adler of the recognition which he deserved during his lifetime. A certain pessimism about the recognition which he and his followers would ever achieve was evident in Alfred Adler's introduction to my book, The Fundamentals of Adlerian Psychology (1950). Had both influences--the psychoanalytic and the traditional scientific orientation--persisted, Adlerians would not have been able to gain the influence they now enjoy.

On the other hand, there were strong trends which Adler, knowingly or not, followed and supported. The recognition of the social nature of man had been almost entirely forgotten in American psychiatry; it was Alfred Adler who revived concern for the social makeup of man, a concept which had been emphasized by Nietzsche and other European thinkers.

Man's freedom to decide for himself was an old religious axiom rejected by causalistic-mechanistic science. The emerging

philosophy of Existentialism supported Adler's concept of man as it was in turn greatly strengthened by Adlerian influence. Man was once again recognized as a decision-making organism and the concept of free will lost its customary disgrace. The scientific revolution of the twentieth century started with Planck's Quantum Theory; and the endeavors of the theoretical physicists supplemented, if they did not dispose of many of the cherished assumptions of classical physics.

Just as the importance of subjectivity became respectable through Husserl's phenomenology, so Kant's recognition of man's limited ability to perceive reality as it is was presented more simply and therefore more effectively in Adler's concept of man's inevitably tendentious or biased apperception which limits or prevents the objective evaluation of reality and of observable "facts."

Although the principle most characteristic of Adler's psychology, the recognition that all behavior has a purpose, did not originate with him, teleology nevertheless became the most characteristic and significant aspect of the Adlerian approach to the understanding of human behavior. The Freudians have become known as "psychoanalysts," the Existential therapists called themselves "Onto-analysts," and Adlerians will probably come to be known in the future as "Teleo-analysts." Looking for the purpose of man's behavior instead of its causes is still limited to relatively few of us in the social and behavioral sciences. Interestingly enough, biologists like the Neo-Vitalists began to recognize the physiological processes as serving a purpose, the survival of the individual (Benedickt, 1933). The American pragmatists like Pierce, William James, and MacDougall were clearly teleoanalytically oriented, albeit to a large degree on the strength of biological assumptions. For them the significance of behavior lay in its consequences. We can observe only the consequences of behavior and all efforts to find its causes are mere speculation. Consequently, we will find as many different convictions and assumptions as to the causes of behavior as there are different schools of thought and different concepts of the nature of man. Although all of our dealings with people, professional or personal, are based on a definite concept of man, we have in fact no scientific tools to evaluate the many personality theories extant. Furthermore, most of us are not even aware of which concept of man we have accepted for ourselves. It was the advent of experimental psychology, of pseudo-scientific psychoanalysis, and of biologically-oriented behaviorism that pushed aside the significant findings of the American pragmatists. It seems that Adlerians have taken up where the pragmatists left off. Adler's emphasis on man's ability to set his own goals aroused the scorn of those scientists who insisted that free will is a myth which belongs to religion and not to science and psychology. They wanted to rely on observable and objective facts, and their insistence was--and often still is--an obstacle to the

recognition of the Adlerian approach as truly scientific. Replacing the so-called "facts" with a growing emphasis on the observer's subjectivity has now become as respectable in physics as Adler's insistence on guessing became recognized as a valid form of scientific investigation in psychology. All evidence of the corrective and therapeutic results obtained through methods Adler had designed would not have been sufficient to overcome the low esteem in which he and his followers were held for a long time, were it not for the current scientific revolution.

Another so-called "weakness" of Adler's psychology is now becoming its greatest asset. Reality was believed to be complex, nearly incomprehensible. With the re-discovery of the Law of Parsimony, the simpler the explanation of observable facts, the greater the probability that it is correct, Adlerian "simplicity," which actually only appears as such in theory, not in practice, has been given status in the new scientific atmosphere that deals more with probabilities than with "facts" and "causes."

Adler considered the holistic approach as fundamental to his psychology. For this reason, he named it "Individual Psychology." Usually misunderstood, the term, the wholeness and indivisibility cannot be divided in different parts as Freud and the experimental psychologists attempted to do. They studies a segment of phenomena in the hope of understanding an individual.

The holistic principle was not original with Adler. Gestalt psychologists recognized that the whole is more than the sum of all its parts and used their approach not for therapy, but for perception and learning. During Adler's time in Vienna, holistic trends were beginning to make inroads in medicine. Martius (1899) was the first to recognize the total constitution of the individual, and Bauer (1935) suggested that the constitution encompasses not one or even several organs of the patient, but the entire personality.

In this milieu Adler devised his holistic approach to the understanding of a person. Initially by the scientific community, Individual Psychology was no match for the term "Holism" which Smuts (1926) promulgated at that time. The holistic concept gained public acclaim and became fashionable. Many psychologists and sociologists have failed to understand the proper usage of the term for they are too deeply steeped into the traditional scientific approach of Reductionism to give up the study of partial phenomena for the search for the whole.

Here Adler's unique contribution was evident in his development of a technique study applicable to the understanding of an individual. For many years, all that was known to the professional community about Adler was his concept of the inferiority complex and his "will to power." Both concepts characterize only one phase of Adler's development and by no means compare in importance with his discovery of methods of perceiving the entire being within a short time, perhaps even instantaneously.

The perception of the whole person is possible if one recognizes the life style adopted by each individual. A unique

pattern characterizes each personality. The holistic approach leads to the perception of a pattern. The movement of each individual in his present field of action provides a basis for an holistic understanding of the individual. In his movements, he expresses his past experiences, his present attitudes, and his ideas of the future. Ambivalence is impossible because the individual cannot proceed in more than one direction at one time. What appears as ambivalence is self-deception or a pretense for escaping the responsibility for the individual's actions. Using Adler's method, the observer can surmise his motivations without ever talking to the individual; simply by following the individual's movements and from these deducing the "private logic" underlying his movements.

The life style is established during the formative years when the child tries to comprehend life, develop approaches and fictitious goals which seem to provide him with a place in life. His movements within the family indicate the way he can be significant and have a place.

Adler's methods of understanding the family constellation is one of his major contributions. In the traditional explanation of the child's personality through the exploration of his relationship to his mother, without the total family constellation perspective, the observer only views the child with a "tunnel vision," seeing only the major relationship and not his total field of movement. Consequently, the children exert a greater influence on each other more than do the parents. Seeing the siblings exert a crucial influence in the personality development of each family member by deciding among themselves the role each intends to play, the parents only reinforce the children's decision.

More important was Adler's discovery of the significance of early recollections. The individual recollects those childhood incidents which are compatible with his concept of himself and life. The early recollections are so reliable as a projective test (Mosak, 1958) that they can be used to ascertain whether or not the patient has changed his life style through therapy and if so, in which way. Freud's book, Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1915) written during the time of his close collaboration with Adler, revealed the strong influence of Adler. Freud accepted Adler's concern for goals in maintaining some semblance of accepting social goals in his concept of the "secondary gain" of the neurosis. Yet, in the same book, he discarded early recollections as having no significance because the "childhood reminiscences" are "concealing memories" or "screen memories," hiding the really important events which were repressed. As a consequence, only recently are early recollections more widely used, although it takes a training in perceiving patterns to make full use of the information provided by early recollections.

Adler revolutionized the technique of psychotherapy and counseling. The full impact of his innovations will only be felt when a larger segment of our professional community will be

acquainted with and trained in our methods. The best way to spread this information is demonstrating the technique for students and larger professional groups. One cannot perceive the implication of our approach by reading or hearing about it; only through observation of actual counseling or therapeutic sessions does the significance of Adler's genius become visible.

In recent times Adler received credit for having been the first ego psychologist. More significant was his exclusive dealing with cognitive processes. He found that emotions are not the driving force as is generally assumed among professionals and laymen alike. They are created by the individual to fortify his decisions, the direction in which he chooses to move. Consequently, the therapist has to recognize the patient's ideas and concepts, in order to help him to change them, if they are mistaken. The technique of confrontation is singular for Adler's approach. We help the patient to see his goals so that he can find better alternatives. This is only possible when we deal with intentions and convictions; emotions could be in no way effected by a disclosure. In this sense, psychotherapy becomes a learning process and the change is equivalent to a conversion.

One of the most controversial aspects of Adler's therapeutic approach is the assumption that the therapist can decide whether the patient is right or wrong in his assumptions and beliefs. Indeed, we show him his basic mistakes! On what ground can we do so? It is true that values differ from person to person, from community to community, culture to culture. Who is in a position to say which values are correct and which faulty? Some assume that each society has the right to determine which behavior pattern is correct and which is not. Adler provided a yardstick by which mistaken approaches of groups and of societies can be recognized. He made a contribution to social and behavioral sciences by the formulation of an "iron-clad logic of social living." It is the first formulation of a universal social law after Marx had attempted to formulate one which turned out not to be universally acceptable. Adler's concept, if understood, applied, and practiced may provide the yardstick for improvement to the individual as well as to groups and nations. It is particularly fitting for our present cultural struggle, prompted by the development of democracy and its concomitant equality for all. The logic of human relationships requires that they cannot be harmonious and stable unless each individual is considered as equal and recognizes his own equality with his fellowmen. All patterns of behavior and intentions, which either degrade the other fellow or oneself, are anti-social and bound to create friction rather than harmony and agreement. We are culture-bound to find a way to treat each other as equals and to believe in our own worth as an equal partner, regardless of what each one may be, regardless of virtues or deficiencies.

The basic positive value which Adler emphasized is social interest (1964). It is a poor translation of the German

Gemeinschaftsgefuehl, a feeling of belonging, of being a part (Ansbacher, 1968). As social creatures, we are born with the capacity and the desire to feel belonging. Adler recognized that the restrictions of social interest are due to an inferiority feeling, a mistaken evaluation of oneself as being inadequate. In this way, Adler provided--probably so far exclusively--a basis for determining what is normal (Shoben, 1957). The question of normalcy is very much discussed today, but seldom do we hear a satisfactory explanation of what it is. One either assumes the average to be normal; whatever the majority of people think and do is then considered to be normal. Or, one considers normalcy as the absence of pathology, which is a vicious circle because how can one be sure of knowing what is pathological if one does not know what is normal? The concept of social interest provides a valid answer. Only where a person feels belonging, is he willing to participate and to contribute, without concern for himself and his status, genuinely concerned with the welfare of the group to which he belongs. Only then can he act and behave in a "normal" way. This social interest is not static. If one feels adequate, one enlarges the degree and extent of one's social interest; it becomes restricted when one feels deficient and inadequate. This is, then, the basis for our therapeutic efforts; to help the individual overcome his doubts in himself, to develop a greater social interest.

Adler showed the way toward a solution of our pressing social problems: the development of social interest in all, not only through counseling and therapy, but through education; through stimulation of a new way of thinking; developing the kind of human beings who can establish democracy on the basis of respect for all; through a fellow feeling with all mankind. The concept of social interest is truly a "Challenge to Mankind" (Adler, 1964). This was Adler's gift to our era.

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