

Am I An Adlerian?

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At first sight this may seem to be a foolish question. Everybody knows that I am an Adlerian, although some want to label me as a “neo-Adlerian.”

Deciding whether or not one is an Adlerian may not be as simple for others. There are many who consider themselves to be “true” Adlerians; however, they are denounced as such by other Adlerians. On the other hand many will deny being Adlerian, although their actions and thinking are typically Adlerian. Who shall sit in judgment?

It seems that everyone could answer this question for himself. I cannot tell you whether you are an Adlerian or not. No one should rightfully judge another, although we size one another up categorizing another as a true Adlerian or not. Many fellow Adlerians express ideas which in my mind are not reconcilable with basic Adlerian concepts. Does this mean that one is not an Adlerian because some of his ideas vary with those of other Adlerians?

In my mind certain basic concepts are fundamental to Adlerian Psychology: holism, teleo-analytic view of goal directed behavior, (behavior as goal-directed), self-determinism, significance of the life style, social interest, inferiority feelings, early recollections, and family constellation. One can assume that everyone considering himself to be an Adlerian will accept these fundamental principles; however, opinions differ even amongst Adlerians. Adler himself emphasized different points in various phases of his development. At first, he assumed that organic inferiorities were the basis for psychopathology. In a second phase, the will to power was attributed to basic human motivation. In his third phase, he emphasized the significance of social interest and the logic of social living based upon human equality. Therefore, variations of concepts pinpointing progress and growth not only preclude that all Adlerians have to agree completely, but also that no one should deny anyone the right to consider himself an Adlerian. Furthermore, we cannot force those who use Adlerian principles to acknowledge that they are Adlerians. Therefore, whether or not one is an Adlerian depends entirely on his own decision.

This point of view seems to imply great confusion and uncertainty. What is the reason for all these contradictions? The answer lies in the realization that the identification with Adlerian psychology means a declaration of belonging to a movement – or as it was formerly called a school – of thought. The implications of this fact are far-reaching. We are more than a group of practicing therapists, we are a movement or political force in the field of education, counseling and therapy. We are living in an era of great confusion and contradictions between two fundamental phases of society, in a period of transition from an autocratic to a democratic form of human relationships. Adler developed concepts and methods for living with each other as equals. Our contemporaries have a choice to move in the same direction, or to oppose our point of view and our techniques.

This answers the question I initially raised. I am an Adlerian, in theory and in practice. There are many however, who will not be satisfied with this answer.

The difference between me and other Adlerians is significant, although it does not justify identifying me as being anything but a "good" or "true" Adlerian. Some of my students, considering my role in the Adlerian movement, insist that the factor that distinguished me from the others is my technique or practical approach. Some suggest that it be called "The Dreikursian approach" (Lowe). It seems that my contribution to Adlerian psychology and to the whole field of education and psychology is a development of specific techniques based upon basic concepts of Alfred Adler, and my innovative principles of an intentional evolutionary element in Adlerian Activities. I have developed a "technology of human relations" based on Adlerian principles using a demonstration approach to teaching education, psychology and human relationships. We are trying to develop basic principles for action, which are teachable, understandable and applicable.

Most of the principles for action which I have developed are found in Adler's publication. He demonstrated practical approaches, especially in his parent-education centers. However, they were presented in a systematic way. When I formulated the four goals of misbehaving children, I did so because I found all of them in Adler's writings. Adler did not systematize them to distinguish one from the other in order that educators might identify them and develop methods of dealing effectively with each of the four goals. Throughout his works, lectures, and writings, Adler emphasized the need for encouragement, but again, he did not go into the details of the technique or the pitfalls of trying to encourage. To my knowledge nowhere in his writings is there any mention of logical and natural consequences, but his various examples showed procedural application of these concepts. His central theme was the life style, but the technique of establishing it is vague. We need to train practitioners who are very clear in identifying life styles. With limited experience, some Adlerians formulate a patient's life style based upon observations which have little or no relevance to the individual's immediate goals. They look only for the long range goals of the life style. We could probably find many other areas where we have expanded Adler's original formulations which were indeed breakthroughs in a field dominated by practitioners who did not know what a life style was, much less how to recognize it and how to change it. Our movement is a reflection of a growing movement which is needed in order to play a part in the evolution of contemporary thought and action.

In this sense I may answer the question which I originally raised. To repeat, I consider myself to be a "true" Adlerian, accepting almost all concepts and techniques proposed by Adler. What may be distinctive in my work is my use of the Adlerian principles applied to well-defined practical approaches and extended to all areas of human relationships. We need a well-defined technique to establish a technology of dealing with each other and for solving conflicts in a democratic way. For us, the theory is the background on which our techniques are based. For examples, without accepting man as a decision-making organism, we could not continue the corrective optimism which characterizes Adlerians; without accepting the holistic principle, we could not justify our approach, i.e., "jump to conclusions", in analyzing a case or a situation. For this practice we are soundly criticized by those who are not holistically oriented and cannot perceive patterns. There are many similar examples of procedures which we use

and which we could not develop without accepting the basic Adlerian orientation.

While Adler recognized equality as the basis for social living, and demonstrated the application of equality throughout his work, it seems that my emphasis on equality is part of my contribution to the world of today. In developing a technology of human relationships needed in a democratic society, we have found and taught specific techniques which can be applied in the family, school, society, labor relations and probably politics and government. We needed a technique in the Twentieth Century which was different from the way conflicts and relationships were dealt with by those who have operated on the principle of competition which characterized our last century.

The need for well-defined techniques is evident when we try to train practitioners on all the various levels of human relationships and conflicts. Generalities, regardless of how good they are in principle, will not suffice. To effect change, we have to demonstrate how it can be done. We are at the beginning of a new era in our whole society, expecting that Adlerians, with their technique and orientation are going to play an ever more effective role in solving the problems of our time.