

ADLER'S CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

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Among the many fundamental contributions of Adler to normal and pathological psychology his conception of the Style of Life is one of the most important. This is the personal individual interpretation of all the experiences of one's life, including the experience of one's own body. It is the result of the thoughts about ourselves, about the world around us, and about our relation to this world. Individual Psychology looks upon mental, emotional, or physical strivings as manifestations of the style of life. It is by now a well established concept that the style is formed in the first four or five years, the so-called formative years. At this time a child is not able to evaluate objectively and therefore to avoid the danger of generalizing; frequently it is not able to distinguish clearly between reality and phantasy. It is therefore not surprising that childish conceptions, faulty judgments, lead to mistakes in the whole style of life. Such mistakes in evaluation (and therefore goals) tend to stay till long after childhood; they color the future and are seldom abandoned even when the personality and the conditions have completely changed and would demand a different approach. "Immaturity" is then to the Individual Psychologist a lack of understanding or unawareness of the style of life, and therefore a continuation of the old mistakes in evaluation and goals. Maturity, on the other hand, means flexibility of approach, that is, freedom from the early mistakes in the style of life. In other words, a mature person's reactions will depend on the particular situation, rather than be bound by the shackles of childhood experience.

The most serious problem of our time is the difficulty of cooperation for the common good of the community (family, nation, etc.). This difficulty is apparent from childhood, and it is our most important criterion in assessing the development of personality. If the experience of the child during the formative years is such that it is led to reject cooperation, its style of life will be antisocial; ordinarily the style will not change much and will lead toward a certain degree of pathological behavior.

If this development is to be avoided, the style of life must first be understood and then the child must be helped to change it. Needless to say, this is the technique of our therapeutic approach to adults as well; children, however, are usually less rigid and much can be done to prevent major personality disorders. The following case study will show the importance of Adler's concepts further.

Fred 4 1/2: Referred by kindergarten teacher who reports that Fred is a mean cold-blooded child who seems to have a "blind spot" if he hurts other children. He is so dangerous to other children that help is urgently needed. The teacher wrote that she is very attached to the child and

that she has put quite an amount of work and consideration into his management, but that she does not see any results and will have to exclude him from kindergarten.

Mother was very eager to discuss the child; she describes him as bright, energetic, "nervy." He gets a "wicked look" when he is injuring children. "He looks so different, he knows what he is doing, but is not sorry; he seems rather proud of it." He smashed a window five times; if he is asked why, "I just do it, I like the tinkle of the glass." He throws food at the brother (2 1/2) and bricks at other children and bites them. He organizes games and revolts if others do. Asked about positive signs the mother mentioned that he is occasionally protective toward his brother and sings loudly on a rocking-horse. He shows either extreme love or extreme hatred. The difficulties started "long before his brother was born."

History: Instrument birth, but healthy, "exceptionally fine specimen," breast-fed for five months, refused solid food for a long time afterwards, is still difficult, choosy, but independent; fed himself early. Talked at three years, still wets bed, was hard to train; masturbated - circumcision helped.

Psychological Climate: Mother is thirty-three, very good looking; nine years older than a brother. Her parents separated when she was ten. She had a poor relationship with mother (with whom she stayed) and brother. She described her childhood as a happy one; she got everything she wanted, was vain and lazy at school, had frequent daydreams of being an adopted princess, had fears of heights and of falling; resented menstruation and still does; liked to have dates, but did not consider marriage until twenty-eight. Father is thirty-seven, has one brother two years older, was favorite son of both parents by being "a good boy." He at first looked up to his older brother, who was aggressive, successful, and a good mixer, but soon he experienced that he was not wanted by him: "I was in his way." In school he had few friends, practically no social life. His daydreams centered around being a hero in sports, "winning." His university years were not too happy and he finally had to quit his course in social work, as "dealing with people was too hard." He went prospecting and later farming, which he liked quite well. He is interested in a certain kind of Indian religion, "Light of Asia," believes that Fred has a bad "Karma" which he brought with him. (This he tells to the child.)

Evaluation of parents: The mother gives the impression of being a self-loving person, not well prepared to take frustrations, not well prepared for cooperation. The father impresses one as a person who needs "to be the only one," who sacrifices social life in order to evade situations in which he would have to compete, to risk his uniqueness, or to give care and guidance to others. The marriage is happy as both give and receive the amount of spoiling which they desire so much.

What kind of parents do they make? Fred was a "very-much-wanted" child of apparently happy, healthy parents, who provided a good home, and sent the child early to kindergarten. Up to now (4 1/2 years) he has been in three kindergartens, and had to be expelled from two. The mother tells that she felt very well during her pregnancy, that she got all the care and attention, but that childbirth was an unexpected difficulty, "a horrible shock, since I had never had to endure anything." This was followed by a deep depression which lasted five months and improved after she weaned the child abruptly. Consequently Fred refused solid food, did not respond easily to training. "Bowel training was an ordeal." Methods of training were very strict, he was spanked severely, locked up; usually father did the spanking "cold-bloodedly, systematically, and efficiently." - "We did not want a spoiled child who would have mastered us." Asked about the effectiveness of these methods, she said: "Nothing seemed to help."

Evaluation of the situation: The parents wanted the child, but they did not have enough insight in themselves, they really did not want to have to care, to give the devotion, attention, which they were wanting so much for themselves. But the human infant needs a great amount of attention and individual consideration, needs to be fed, to be picked up and fondled, needs to experience that his parents understand his physiological and emotional needs, that they are his friends, and willing and encouraging helpers.

Much that is described today as a new discovery centers around "the infant's basic needs and the undesirability of letting him experience too soon too many frustrating situations." This is hardly new for Individual Psychologists. Adler always mentioned that the parents' main task is to "invite" the child to cooperate, and that the best way is to be "an encouraging friend."

Evaluation of Fred's behavior: He shows (i) abnormal aggressiveness, (ii) absence of guilt feelings, (iii) little or no empathy or social feelings. There is a history of difficult childbirth, and a rather late development of speech (at three years of age), so that the possibility of some brain pathology could be considered. If, however, we understand his style of life, his behavior becomes logical. It is a strong reaction for not having his needs for basic acceptance fulfilled. He acts as if he would think, "If this life is a struggle between weak and strong, then I have to be the strongest. I do what I want, I don't care about other people; I have to demonstrate my power by hurting others and by destroying." (He is a very strong, well developed child, constitutionally predominantly somatonic, according to Sheldon's classification, so that the active, destructive behavior was his most natural choice.) Naturally he has no remorse, since the necessary empathy is absent.

To complete the clinical observation a Stanford-Benet test and a Rorschach test were made. The report corroborates the psychiatric findings, and shows how helpful such a report can be in the hands of a

psychologist with an understanding of Adler's concept of purposeful behavior. This understanding is seen to be essential in the tests' evaluation.

Psychologist's Report: Fred was brought to the office by his mother, who explained that she and her husband were most anxious to obtain an estimate of their child's intellectual level, as they felt his misbehavior must be due to feeble-mindedness or to some other organic defect.

The "bad child" turned out to be a handsome, sturdy boy who readily took my hand when he caught sight of the enticing test objects on the desk. Keenly observant and outgoing, he was much more interested in the things around him than in the examiner whom he apparently accepted as part of the scene but of little interest as another self.

His mental age in the Stanford Binet was four years eight months, which in a child whose chronological age is four years four months, gives an I. Q. of 108, or average.

It was evident throughout the test that Fred's motor skills were considerably better developed than his verbal ones. Tasks involving visual-motor coordination and organization, visual memory, manipulation of familiar concrete objects, were done easily and speedily, while his performance in the essentially verbal tests showed less skill or interest in words and ideas than in actual doing. Abstract concepts, memorizing of meaningless word combinations, verbal play of various kinds, received only reluctant attention. His basal age level was Year III, with his last successes occurring at Year VII.

Fred's test performance provides an interesting illustration of the effects of personality traits on numerical intelligence ratings as obtained in a test of this sort. Several of his failures were due, the examiner feels, not to an inability to comprehend or to carry out the instructions, but to his tendency to defy by doing the opposite of what was requested or to do as he wished just when it suited him. He showed a lack of the usual suggestibility and social-approval-motivation whereby most children will comply even with uninteresting instructions because of a desire to please the adult in charge. For instance, in the Aesthetic Comparisons test, he showed his negativism and lack of acceptance of our usual cultural patterns in doggedly pointing out the ugliest face as the "Prettiest" in all cases, though examiner satisfied herself that he unquestionably understood the meaning of the word "pretty." The only Year III-6 test which he failed was that of obeying simple instructions, when he insisted on handling the objects in his own way, despite his intellectual grasp of the requests. On the other hand, he readily passed the similar test at Year IV-6, perhaps because the commissions to be carried out were more related to real life experience, perhaps because he had developed some greater "acceptance" of the examiner.

In general, test performance suggests a practical, outgoing, energetic child whose intelligence is probably better than average, but who is immature with regard to the development of suggestibility and cooperativeness.

Rorschach Test: Because of the young child's underdeveloped critical capacity and lack of social inhibition with regard to what is "sayable" and "thinkable," the Rorschach technique gives invaluable insight into the dynamics of the young personality. In his responses to the ink blots, Fred reveals most vividly his overwhelming fearfulness and awareness, of his own smallness and defencelessness in a world of bigger and stronger "enemies." In eight out of the ten blots, he clearly projected his concept of the world as a place of constant warfare. Animate figures in his environment are seen as hostile forces who want to do him harm, and the figures with which he identifies himself must be strong and ruthless in order to combat these large and powerful enemies. Record suggests unusually unmodified sadism, with marked evidence of the motive of "getting even" with the threatening figures around him. The main goal is that of becoming strong in order to achieve self-protection and revenge.

The possibility of sublimation of this desire for strength and power into an attitude of protectiveness toward the weaker is suggested, however, in two interpretations where the small one after killing the big huge giant or frog turns to the task of looking after the helpless mice. Interesting also is the evidence of a normal four-year old interest in anatomical differences between the sexes, reproduction, and mother-attachment.

Though Fred's responses show good congruence between the objective characteristics of the blot form and the initiating of the associative process, the stereotypy and strength of his own preoccupations are so great that he is carried far beyond what can actually be perceived in the blot to an interpretation which is an almost pure projection of his own disturbing inner promptings. He goes beyond the "as if it is" to the "it is," and then excitedly states his conviction as to what he must go on to do about the situation himself, either in defiance or in direct attack.

Keynote of the record is the need to be cruel and aggressive as a defence against overwhelming feelings of insecurity in a hostile world.

Prognosis and therapy: The style of life must be changed. The details of the technique need not be considered here. Essentially, the child must learn to love fearlessly some adult human being, preferably the mother. He must get to like to conform in some measure, and to grow, i.e., to cooperate with social demands, out of his love and the security which he experiences. The prognosis will depend on whether the mother can win the child's confidence, can prove herself to be a friend, and on Fred's ability to respond adequately to this new emotional relationship.

There is nothing rare in this case history except possibly in the degree of antisocial behavior. Our object has been to show the tremendous importance of Adler's fundamental teaching, especially as regards social interest or empathy, as the basis for the regaining of productive social behavior. Unfortunately these fundamentals are far too little understood as yet, and Adler's memory can best be served by our continued use and propagation of his contributions.