

ADLER'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE VARYING FUNCTIONS
OF A PSYCHOLOGIST

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"It is not important that they give me credit. Important is only that they use the views of Individual Psychology rightly."

Alfred Adler spoke these words to me in California during the summer of 1936, the last summer I was to work beside him. Since that day in May, 1937, when the news of his death reached us from Aberdeen, I have had occasion to recall them again and again. His work goes on in the bettered lives of his patients and those with whom they come in contact; it continues through the work of his followers and students, who in turn influence their own patients, followers, and students. But it seems to me that all too rarely does the name of "Individual Psychology" or Alfred Adler appear in the literature obviously based on his findings. Perhaps part of the explanation of this lies in the fact that his concepts have become so much a part of our thinking. This thought was expressed by a San Francisco physician, who, after hearing Dr. Adler speak, said, "I had not realized how much of his original thought exists in the basic thinking on child psychology, how much of it we have come to consider as axiomatic."

How these basic views of Individual Psychology permeate our diagnostic thinking and our therapeutic and educational techniques has been clearly seen in twenty-one years of practice since, as a speech therapist, the writer first came to Dr. Adler's course at the New School for Social Research in 1926.

It is to be hoped that the reader will forgive the somewhat personal aspect of the material since this article is to be simply one individual's expression of how Alfred Adler's teachings have been utilized in various psychological fields.

Drei Foelle aus der Praxis (1) illustrated how, with a brief case history, based on the Individual Psychology Questionnaire and trained observation of behavior, a speech therapist was able to identify with her pupils through an understanding of their individual life patterns and the motivation of their symptoms. Symptomatic treatment, when given, was used largely as a means of encouraging the pupil, of increasing his feeling of adequacy but it was thought that the more permanent results were achieved by giving him a sense of being valued, developing his social feeling, helping him to so modify his goal that it was useful to others as well as satisfying to himself.

These are generalities, but my colleagues, my fellow Individual Psychologists, know with what specificity such generalities can become therapeutic or re-educational techniques.

A later interesting application of Adlerian theories was in a psychological clinic to which elementary school children, who presented problems academic or otherwise, were sent. Here psychometric tests, personality questionnaires, Adler's three diagnostic themes and other techniques were combined. Out of this experience came School Problems and the Family Constellation (2). The original presentation of this paper before the Individual Psychology Society of Vienna was postponed until Dr. Adler's return from the United States in the summer of 1933, since the writer did not know whether he was in agreement with her ideas on psychometrics and the value of the intelligence quotient.

In this connection it should be borne in mind that, when Alfred Adler first came to this country in the 1920's, the I.Q. was something of a sacred figure, a psychometric golden calf, as it were. Adler, keen, scientifically trained and intuitive, perceived then what twenty years of psychometric practice have since proved, namely that the I.Q., as such, was much overrated. In order to counteract this tendency, Adler, in his lectures, seminars and discussions, for some time consistently discouraged the use of intelligence tests.

It was therefore thought possible that he might disagree with some of the points raised in the paper. In his discussion, however, he gave us his opinion that as long as an intelligence quotient was considered with other diagnostic media to help create a picture of a total personality, to give further insight into the "style of life," its use was legitimate, particularly if it was considered as a possibly modifiable measure.

At a later date Individual Psychology was used in a nursery school setting. In its application there, young teachers showed increased capacity to understand children during the early pattern-forming years, and frequently home conditions were also improved. It was in the year 1934 when the depression was at its height. Ours was a Federal Emergency Nursery School. Marked feelings of inferiority were particularly apparent among fathers, the erstwhile breadwinners of the family. Often the wives held them in not entirely unspoken contempt. The homemaker's work continued as before but the sole duty of many a former "good provider" seemed to consist of lifting his feet from the rug while the housewife swept under them. Some of these fathers came to parent conferences, some stopped to chat when they called for their children at school, others were seen in their homes. Soon several fathers were making suitable small furniture for youngsters at home. One of them made simple blocks of cheese boxes and presented them to the nursery school. Wives were helped to have greater insight into their husband's as well as their children's difficulties. Thus the understanding of Individual Psychology helped not only to create a better school but, in some cases, it was instrumental in providing for the children more harmonious homes as well.

Individual Psychology in the High School (3) is a discussion of students individually treated and a description of a plan by which two hundred incoming freshmen were evaluated not only in the light of achievement and potential intellectual capacity but also in terms of a personality picture, resulting from insight into the life pattern of each student.

Here the materials used consisted of the three Adlerian themes, in the student's own handwriting, which were entitled "The Very First Thing I Remember," "My First Day At School," and "A Dream I Had One Night." In addition, we had the results of achievement tests, group intelligence tests, a knowledge of the family constellation and, in some instances, other data.

Up to now it will be noted that this report deals, for the most part, with normal children of preschool through high school age. Somewhat outside the scope of this paper would be a discussion of the applicability of Individual Psychology to problems encountered in a mental hospital during the war years, such as are dealt with in The Persistence of the Individual Life Pattern in War Psychoses (4).

During these last months of at least technical peace, the writer has taken part in State and Municipal programs which foster the mental hygiene aspects of public health work. The key person in such a program is the public health nurse. Her access to homes makes her the natural channel for teaching designed to increase the mother's capacity to understand her child. Not only do we see the value of an understanding of Individual Psychology for such a program but it is apparent that Adler's teachings in the second, third, and fourth decades of this century lie at the very roots of the program itself. Consistently the mental hygienist stresses such matters as the importance of the early pattern-forming years in shaping later attitudes; the infant's need for a feeling of security; the importance of early socialization and its relation to feeding; sibling rivalry and the consideration of position in the family constellation; understanding not only the usual development of a child but so identifying with the individual child that it is possible to anticipate his behavior and prevent problems from arising. This is only to touch upon the varied aspects of a program of emotional prophylaxis which is dependent on the orientation of Individual Psychology. That some instructors and practitioners accept such principles as a matter of course makes them not less the fruit of Alfred Adler's teachings.

Let me close with an application of some of Dr. Adler's own concepts. They are my concepts now, filtered through my own life pattern and, as such, I express them humbly. In so far as his acts are "useful," in so far as his behavior is an expression of "social feeling," in so far as he functions in harmony with "the stream of evolution," man is immortal. With this thought in mind, we, Alfred Adler's pupils, friends, and colleagues, are able to express the conviction that now, ten years after his death, he lives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- (1) Mandell, Sibyl "Drei Faelle aus der Praxis," Internationale Zeitschrift fuer Individualpsychologie 1928. V. I
- (2) Idem. "School Problems and the Family Constellation," International Journal of Individual Psychology II, 3, 1936.
- (3) Idem. "Individual Psychology in the High School," Ibid. III, 3, 1937.
- (4) Idem. "The Persistence of the Individual Life Pattern in War Psychoses," Individual Psychology Bulletin Vol. IV, 1st quarter, 1944-45.