# ALFRED ADLER'S THEORY OF COMPENSATION APPLIED TO CURRENT STUDIES ON SIDEDNESS

Danica Deutsch & Asya Kadis,
New York

"In Individual Psychology we have insisted that the mind experiences the degree of ability possessed by the organs and reckons with it...sometimes too much, with the result that it gets frightened...."

Alfred Adler

Handedness, which means the preferred use and greater efficiency of one hand, has been a subject of great interest for centuries. The whole scale of evaluation from ancient superstition and prejudice to current scientific theory has been applied to left-handedness in particular. It has even been stigmatized as a sign of degeneration, a characteristic of criminals, and so on.

Many have attempted to prove that conversion of left-handed children results in confusion, directional incongruity in space, reversals, stuttering and other types of speech impediment. This hypothesis was so thoroughly accepted that many of its exponents saw conversion as the source of all the difficulties in adjustment and learning. They warned parents and teachers not to convert a left-handed child lest cerebral confusion be provoked.

Educators and teachers who gave ear to these admonitions found themselves in a state of confusion. They did not know whether or not to influence a child in his dextrality. Dr. Abram Blau, in his very valuable recent monograph Masterhand (1) makes this indecision on the part of educators responsible for the large increase of sinistrality among school children in the last few decades.

A step toward clarification of the whole subject has been the emphasis upon the significant fact that handedness is but one feature of a more complex phenomenon, that of sidedness, and that eyes and legs and other paired organs manifest similar tendencies.

Dr. B. S. Parson is the chief proponent of the theory that eyedness and handedness usually are linked together and that eyedness occurs first (2). He maintains further that the dominant or sighting eye determines the master hand; and, when left-eyedness appears in a right-handed individual, it may be assumed that he was originally left-handed but shifted by virtue of his early training.

Dr. Samuel T. Orton maintains (3) that most children develop predominant use of either the right or left hemisphere with a hereditary tendency as the determining factor. He substantiates this point of view with the observation that there is a "persistent appearance of left-handed

individuals of all races in spite of many generations of directive training and strong social pressure toward the right hand."

Dr. Blau opposes these theories:

> "The origin of dextrality may be summed up as due to an encouragement of dextral tendencies. When this encouragement is absent, we have educational conditions for sinistrality, whether these are deliberate and intentional or accidental and unconscious.... The age of one to two years seems to be the turning point for left or right orientation or dominance."

Dr. Blau's study of the origin and meaning of handedness starts with the assumption that "no human function is separable from the person who executes it, nor from the setting in which it occurs...." He gives the three main principles of the "total approach" as the following: 1) The whole organism is something different than the mere addition of its parts. 2) The organism is a dynamic, changing process. 3) An understanding of the human organism always involves the combined application of many biological and social sciences.

The foregoing approach of Dr. Blau appeals to us as the best hypothesis of those advanced. It is in accordance with the basic principles of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology: The human being is an indivisible entity striving towards a self-set goal. He is endowed with creativeness which takes an active part in the development of his personality. In order to understand a human being fully we must consider him within the frame of his cultural background and his social relationship.

A left-handed and left-eyed child in a right-handed culture might feel that he is different from others and will probably consider himself inferior as a consequence. His difference becomes most apparent in the school room when he is faced with the challenge of learning how to read and write - the first essential steps towards acquiring knowledge. To some of these children learning seems to come without effort, others enjoy a measure of success after a considerable struggle, while some fail completely.

Failures have been attributed to (a) low I.Q., (b) foreign language background, (c) cultural background, (d) speech impediments, (e) sensory motor defects, (f) cerebral defects, (g) organic visual and auditive handicaps, and (h) left-handedness.

Increasing attention is focusing on left-eyedness. The writers' experience in remedial work with children of various age-groups reveals that of all the psychosomatic causes of learning difficulties, left-eyedness and its attendant emotional upsets are the most numerous. It manifests itself in reversals in reading and writing letters, words, numbers; low rate of speed, poor comprehension, lack of rhythm, omission of letters, syllables, etc. We discovered that it was also frequently the hidden cause of the difficulty among music students who were below average in reading music.

The functional part of this problem, it should be recalled, is the fact that we focus predominantly with one eye, the dominant eye. It is

used in reading as well as in the eye-hand coordination process of writing. Not only is the eye involved in this process but also the eye movement. Thus, in a left-eyed person, the eye moves preferably from right to left.

Here, then, lies the answer to at least one question which is posed in this paper: to retrain or not to retrain sinistrals. Obviously, left-eyed children must have correctional treatment, for there is not nor will there be, we dare say, a right-to-left publication project designed to ease the way for such children.

Left-eyed children have a considerably harder start at school than children who are left-handed but not left-eyed. The reason is clear. Left-handedness is easily discerned by the child as well as by his parents. It is accordingly made responsible for some of his initial difficulties. But left-eyedness exists unknown to the child and the average grown-up and is therefore not detected as the impeding factor.

Consequently the child, forced to measure himself with others at school, does not know why he fails. He blames himself, his parents, teachers, or unrelated physical factors for his inability to reach the level of his grade. Nervous tension grows within him. Disappointment, doubt, pressure and punishment are bound to follow, thus molding his psychological super-structure. Often he becomes so discouraged that he adopts a negative attitude to learning in general. This is not an inevitable result of the handicap per se but is a result of the fact that the handicap is discovered too late or sometimes not at all.

Characteristic remarks of these children illustrate their sharp disappointment:

"When I read 'was' it's 'saw,' and when I read 'saw' it's 'was.' I always get mixed up."

"I just don't see right and the doc says my eyes are all right, so something must be wrong with me!"

"I'll never learn to read, I'm just dumb."

"I have sawdust in my head."

A survey test of laterality in the first four grades of one school revealed an interesting phenomenon. The number of clear-cut cases of sidedness diminished with each ascending grade; and the proportion of mixed cases increased - there was little uniformity in relationship of left-handedness, eyedness, and footedness among the older children. This could be interpreted as the positive compensatory response of the children to the conventional standards of their environment. Left-handed children who enter school socially well prepared will desire to conform to the ways of their school-mates and to meet the demands of their teachers. Some actually succeed in acquiring right-handedness and -eyedness unassisted and without apparent disturbances. Educators find that there are even children with the afore mentioned handicaps who become excellent readers and first-rate students. Instead of succumbing to failure and all its disastrous implications, they use their difficulties as a challenge which they strive to master and do master.

But there are negative compensatory responses which spring in the wake of unsuccessful initial efforts: some children choose the passive way, adopt the giving up attitude; others turn to athletics where they become champions; still others create for themselves a fictitious glory by becoming bullies or class clowns. And then there are those who seek protection in psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches, vomiting, enuresis, etc.

These and similar responses are easily understood in the light of Adlerian teaching. The children are approaching the task of learning in precisely the same manner that they approach any other task in life, that is, according to their established personality patterns. The one withdraws from difficulties, the other faces them and overcomes them. If a child persists in faulty reading it indicates that he is building up a resistance to the whole learning process which amounts to an incipient neurotic trend. Consequently, we must attack his reading difficulties not merely with corrective, symptomatic methods, but by approaching the personality of the child as a whole.

It remains to be determined by further research and observation whether left-sidedness is purely the result of a learning process, formed in the earliest years. But even though ensuing research should point to innate predisposition for lateral preference, early training along corrective and compensatory lines is still desirable. Improved habits in fundamentals such as eating, writing, etc., will come much easier if the work with the child is begun at an early stage. Pre-school training may even save the child from falling into left-eyed habits. In education the avoidance of overemphasis on use of one or the other hand is of basic importance. By not exerting pressure the child's cooperation is more readily won, and opposition to needed training processes are prevented. "Negativism" as the natural reaction of the child in his period of ego-finding might be the cause in some cases for a stubborn clinging to left-handedness. But it is due to the genius of Alfred Adler that we have learned to understand that "negativism" can be an effect as well as a cause - a psychological compensation of a phenomenon experienced as an organ inferiority (4). It is an organ inferiority in so far as it is a deviation from the standard requirements of our right-sided culture.

Thus, a child might find himself different from others, awkward, with poor motor coordination, wrestling with reading and writing difficulties, trying hard to measure up to his environment and never succeeding. Such a child may well compensate for his inferiority feelings by negativism, that is, an asocial or even anti-social attitude (5).

Helping such children to understand the reason for their difficulties and how to overcome them, releasing them from responsibilities they are not equipped to meet, will raise their self-esteem and with it will come the courage for new attempts in productive fields.

"The basis of educability lies in the striving of the child to compensate for his weaknesses. A thousand talents and capabilities may arrive from the stimulus of inadequacy." (6)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

(1) Abram Blau, The Masterhand, New York, The American Orthopsychiatric Monograph No. 5, 1946.
(2) B. S. Parson, Lefthandedness, New York, Macmillan, 1924.
(3) S. T. Orton, Reading, Writing and Speech Problems in Children, New York, W. W. Norton, 1937.
(4) Alfred Adler, Study of Organ Inferiority and its Psychical Compensation. New York, The Nervous and Mental Disease Monographs No. 24, 1917 (Reprint 1946).
(5) The Education of Children. New York, Greenberg Pub., 1930.
(6) Understanding Human Nature. New York, Greenberg Pub., 1927 (Reprint 1946).