

# AN ANALYSIS OF ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY FROM A RESEARCH ORIENTATION<sup>1</sup>

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It is gratifying to many psychologists who have long understood the significance of Adler's theory that recently there appears to be an increasing recognition of Adler's contribution to personality theory and to the practice of psychotherapy. This increased interest in Individual Psychology seems to be a result of more and more psychotherapists finding themselves dissatisfied with classical psychoanalysis and discovering, sometimes to their surprise, that their own deviations have much in common with the much earlier stated views of Adler.

The nature of these shifts can be summarized quite briefly: (a) denial of the importance of instincts for the explanation of behavior, (b) denial of the primacy of the sexual drive in the explanation of all psychopathology, (c) greater emphasis on what is typically referred to as ego needs and ego defenses, (d) greater desire to look upon man from a moral or ethical point of view, (e) recognition that psychotherapeutic techniques should include an explicitly stated set of ethical values, since values play an implicit role in any case in all therapy. In the practice of psychotherapy itself, the trend is towards a more active and spontaneous role for the therapist, shorter therapy, and greater effort to put psychotherapy on a "common sense" basis.<sup>2</sup>

Along with this increased recognition of Adler's contributions to the practice of psychotherapy there has been some, but perhaps not as great, reawakened interest in teaching Adler's theory in university psychology departments. This interest tends to be reflected more in teaching personality theory but less in graduate student or faculty research.

Many workers in the mental hygiene fields have long recognized Adler's profound insights into human nature and feel some personal satisfaction in this increased recognition. However, it seems most

<sup>1</sup>This paper was presented as an invited address at the 10th Annual Conference of the American Society for Adlerian Psychology, New York, November, 1961.

<sup>2</sup>See Rotter (7) for a discussion of recent trends towards Adlerian psychology in the field of psychotherapy.

socially useful that this recognition should not be the occasion merely for self-satisfaction, but rather, a stimulus for attempts further to develop, systematize, and change Adler's views. Static theories ultimately lose their usefulness to a growing science. Adler himself continuously changed his views, not haphazardly, but in his own effort to continue the life force toward the perfection of which he has so frequently spoken. Such development and extension of Adler's theory has been going on, and many important contributions, particularly to the field of psychotherapy have been made.

This paper deals only with one particular line of development, which is of special interest to the author. It does not seem fruitful to evaluate whether or not this particular direction of development is more important than, for example, the extension of Adler's ideas to the treatment of various groups of patients or to an analysis of international cooperation. The concern of this exposition is with the refinement of Adler's ideas in a way that they may be expressed in objectively verifiable or testable form. Such tests could be made in laboratory or more natural life situations. The primary concern is that the ideas may be tested under objective, scientifically controlled conditions. This is not a new thought. Many experimental tests have been made, particularly of Adler's more specific clinical observations, especially those relating to the consequences of various sibling positions. In fact, in a recent research monograph Schachter (8) has described a series of findings regarding differences in affiliation, dependence, and behavior under threat among first-born, only, and other children, all of which could have been predicted from an Adlerian point of view. Other recent work has related position in the family to emotional reactions to stress (5), self-evaluation behavior (6), and susceptibility to social influence in controlled laboratory situations (9).

#### PROPRIETY OF RESEARCH

Before proceeding, one might ask if this goal of stating Adler's views as objectively testable hypotheses is a proper and useful thing to do. Is it consistent with the over-all philosophy of science implicit in Individual Psychology? It appears so to this writer. Although the Ansbachers (3) have placed Adler as a subjective, in contrast to an objective psychologist, this must be understood in terms of the special semantics with which these words are used in the Ansbachers' context. It is true that Adler departed from a mechanistic explanation of

behavior based on physiological variables, that is, reductionistic in character, and it is true that he emphasized that each individual sees life in his own way. However, he has always implied that the individual's social behavior and his only indirectly observable mental life could be lawfully predicted from his experiences.

Adler's frequent reference to and great dependence on concepts such as pampering, rejection, physical handicaps, illnesses, unequal struggle with siblings, as explanations for behavior and for the development of a particular style of life, provide clear-cut evidence that he thought in terms of regularly related antecedents and consequences. Personality is a resultant of learning, and psychotherapy is a process of re-education (1). Adler's emphasis on the treatment of parents of problem children reflects this view. In his approach to psychotherapy, Adler distinctly took an historical view, seeking explanations in the events of childhood. Although he attributes some general explanation of human nature to inherent characteristics of the species, he ultimately finds his explanation for individual differences in the objectively describable interactions of an individual with his meaningful environment. Certainly Adler's interest in the prevention of mental disorder or in education implies a central concern with the regular relationships between objectively describable external events and the individual's behavior.

It is recognized that Adlerian psychology emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual and that behavior is a function of the whole individual. This does not mean, however, that there are not nomothetic characteristics of individuals that can be abstracted. Although all individuals are different, they may still be ordered along a continuum describing how dependent they are in a given situation or how much social interest they exhibit under specific conditions. Research with groups provides only statistical and probabilistic answers to questions, but these answers are our best clues to the validity or utility of a proposition.

Adlerians generally believe in the creative power of an individual. The person has the power to influence his experience and its effects by his own processes. Some might interpret this notion to imply that prediction of human behavior or regularity in human behavior does not occur, and studies of the regular relationship between antecedents and consequences are impossible. However, this is not a necessary implication. Nomothetic research assumes only probabilistic differences among groups.

Having attempted to present a case showing that the principles of Individual Psychology are not antithetical to the development of operationally testable general hypotheses, this paper will proceed with an analysis of the problems inherent in the testing of some of Adler's major theoretical assumptions—basic assumptions, that is, as differentiated from what might be called his clinical observations.

#### DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

In his last book (2) Adler lists as the three basic assumptions of Individual Psychology: (*a*) a universal sense of inferiority, (*b*) that it is a characteristic of life that the individual will struggle to overcome his inferiority, and (*c*) that the individual's and society's adjustment depends on the development of social feeling. How these characteristics evolve in an individual under the influence of his creative power determines his style of life. The style of life includes the goal toward which he strives, how he screens and evaluates his experiences, and how he reacts toward them.

In attempting experimentally to test these and other major assumptions as hypotheses, there appear to be certain difficulties or limitations which in fact provide a challenge to those who wish to utilize and expand the potential of Individual Psychology as a theory. These difficulties are:

1. Adler's concepts are frequently very general in nature and they lack clear-cut operations for measurement. For example, if one wishes to measure how much social interest a person has, will one do this on the basis of the person's own statements? Or is this done on the basis of what he actually does for others, and if so, who evaluates his contributions? Or is this done on the basis of his conscious or unconscious intent? That is, for measurement purposes it is not always clear what logical operations should be made in order to measure some specific variable.

2. There are too few lower-order or more specific constructs. For example, while the style of life is an important construct in Adler's theory, in order to make experimental tests of its presumed generality one has to differentiate, classify, or group individuals. Although occasionally Adler makes such crude groupings himself, for example, neurotic versus non-neurotic styles of life, specific predictions probably require more definite categories or classifications. This is not to suggest that a typology of styles of life be made, but rather a logical

basis for categorizing or grouping should be devised. It would be understood that the individuals within a group differ and that differences between groups are probably continuous rather than discreet.

Perhaps another example would be in testing some of Adler's views about the effects of pampering. Pampering, again, is a very general category, and exact predictions might require breaking down the concept of pampering into more specific kinds of parental behavior such as overprotection, overindulgence, overdomination, etc.

Another example could be the concept of distance or how the individual avoids a test of his adequacy. Adler obviously recognizes many techniques of defense against failure. It would be useful to systematize these by listing at least the broader categories of defense, and attempting to specify the conditions under which an individual will rely on one rather than another technique of setting a distance between himself and his goal of superiority.

3. The ideas are not fully systematized, particularly with regard to overlapping constructs. For example, are the struggle for personal superiority and masculine protest the same or merely overlapping constructs? If different, to what extent are they overlapping? Similarly, are lack of common sense, neurotic style of life, and mistaken style of life synonymous or different? If different, how do they relate to one another?

These questions raised should be regarded not so much as criticisms, but as challenges to those who are interested in expanding Individual Psychology in this particular way, that is, in developing it in a direction which leads to increased possibilities for experimental or objective verification.

#### RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

To illustrate the goals referred to above, a specific operation for each of several of Adler's constructs will be selected, and then some hypotheses regarding relationships which he has already suggested will be stated. In these examples I am assuming that reasonably valid and independent measures of childhood experience can be made with such techniques as interviews, specially designed projective techniques of the Thematic Apperception Test and Incomplete Sentences Test type, and by questionnaires.

Adlerians may not agree with the hypotheses or like the operations utilized, but these should at least serve to illuminate part of the process advocated in this paper. None of the hypotheses may be true.

However, the nice thing about hypotheses is that they merely have to be stated in testable form, and research can evaluate their validity and lead to their better formulation. In fact, it is precisely in analyzing the reasons for a failure to predict that one learns something one did not know before.

1. Should masculine protest in women be operationally defined as attempts to achieve dominance or control of others by the reliance on culturally defined masculine techniques, then this tendency could be measured by ratings of trained observers or by sociometric techniques. With this measure the following hypotheses regarding the strength of masculine protest in women could be proposed:

*a.* When both parents favor a male sibling, there is a greater probability that masculine protest will be developed in a female child.

*b.* When a father has himself a great need to demonstrate masculinity but has no son, there is a greater probability that his daughters will exhibit a stronger masculine protest.

*c.* When in a given family, the parents frequently quarrel and seek to dominate one another and the father is the more successful in this pursuit, the daughters will develop a stronger masculine protest.

2. The notion that individuals differ in attempting to deal with their inadequacies, some by compensating and some by overcompensating, is fairly clear cut. It seems to the writer that the operations for compensation versus overcompensation can be readily specified. But what are the conditions which lead to one rather than the other? Some hypotheses follow:

*a.* Compensation is more likely if the parents tend to emphasize the child's inadequacy or weakness and to deal with his limitations by protection rather than encouragement.

*b.* When the child's inadequacy or inferiority is in a limited area and he obtains general acceptance in other life areas, then overcompensation is more likely.

3. Social interest as a variable provides more difficulty in arriving at an operational definition. It is unlikely that any one operational definition would please most Individual Psychologists. However, for these purposes social interest could be defined as the presence of observable behavior which other members of a social group regard as contributing to the welfare of the group. Obviously, such a measure could be readily arrived at by sociometric means. With this as a basis

for measurement, it seems to this writer that Adler suggests at least the following three hypotheses in regard to the extent to which social interest is built up in a given individual:

*a.* If the parents are affectionate and giving of themselves to their children and to others, this provides a model for the development of social interest.

*b.* If the mother in particular, or both parents require as a condition for their own love, cooperative or responsible behavior on the part of the child, then the child will be more likely to be high in social interest.

*c.* If the individual has more reason to perceive himself as one of a group, that is, if strong group identifications are built up, he will be more likely to develop social interest. (Such reasons for group identification could include direct teaching or emphasis on group membership, the occurrence of threat or misfortune to the group as a whole rather than the individual, etc.)

If some valid measure of social interest could be devised and the conditions for the growth of social interest clearly specified, then in the field of social psychology numerous hypotheses could be tested. These could be concerned with relating childhood training conditions, as well as predictions from possible test instruments, to prejudiced behavior, nationalism, social action-taking behavior, creativity, etc. Definite statement of the family and cultural conditions making for the growth of social interest could likewise be used to make predictions about and test for important differences in political behavior among various subcultures and nations.

4. Testing hypotheses about the generality of the style of life is somewhat more difficult, although in psychology there is a large body of data already available on the effects of psychological needs on perception (4). What is necessary, as has already been suggested, is that some anchoring points for grouping be made. Following this, the specification of the antecedent childhood conditions should be stated for the various categories or dimensions used. Perhaps, rather than a typology or a group of parallel categories, what might be useful here, is a series of dimensions along which styles of life can be ordered, e.g., realistic—unrealistic, dependent—independent, control through weakness—control through asserting power or dominance, seeking love—seeking praise, egocentric—sociocentric. Such a list of lower-level constructs which can characterize several important aspects of

different styles of life could then be used to devise predictions, e. g., about how individuals perceive their world, or more specifically what meaning they attribute to very ambiguous stimuli in the laboratory and to the perception of events in controlled small-group interactions. The perception of significant social and political events as measured by questionnaire and interviews could likewise be studied.

5. For a last illustration of operationalizing Adler's views the concept of pampering will be considered. This is relied on heavily in Adler's analysis of the basis for maladjustment. To begin this analysis, we would differentiate three forms of pampering: (*a*) overprotection, referring only to the parents' efforts to keep the child from physical harm or disease; (*b*) overindulgence, referring to the parents' giving the child whatever he wants, as much as it is possible, and demanding little or nothing in return; and finally (*c*) overdomination, which is characterized by the parents not allowing the child the opportunity to make decisions for himself. Some hypotheses that follow very logically can be stated which can be tested in the laboratory with already developed techniques:

*a.* When parents do not allow the child the opportunity to make decisions, then, as an adult in a laboratory situation involving difficult choices, he will show more evidence of conflict, delay, and other indications of indecision in making his choices.

*b.* The more the parents overindulge the child, then as an adult, the less cooperative he will be in a small-group problem-solving task where he has the choice of cooperating with or competing with the members of his group.

*c.* The more parents overprotect the child from physical harm, then, the more likely it is that he will show fearful and disorganized behavior in a laboratory situation involving problem solving when under the threat of strong shock.

#### CONCLUSIONS

These are only a few illustrations of many possible hypotheses of a testable nature that can be developed from Adler's writing. The specific ones suggested may be satisfactory to no one, but the hope is that they will at least indicate that the goal of systematizing Individual Psychology is a worthwhile one. The case method will always be an important scientific way of arriving at new insights into human nature. However, the same cases seen by clinicians of different



schools are interpreted, understood, and treated differently. The members of each school have equal conviction of the "truth" or value of their method. Progress is slowed down when differences in views can only be resolved by verbal argument and assertion.

The formal testing of hypotheses, controlled for any possible bias, is the logical step that follows from insight arrived at by the analysis of clinical experience. The findings from such research provide the vitality for growth necessary for any theory that is to survive. If Adler's important insights into human nature are going to continue to contribute to our understanding and become public knowledge, they must ultimately be subject to scientific verification, and must evolve in the process of such verification.

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