

# ADLERIAN CONCEPTS IN CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY: THE CHANGING SCENE<sup>1</sup>

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Psychology, like all the major sciences, has undergone many changes in recent years. Some of the developments in American psychology since World War II have had profound consequences not only upon public life but also upon scientific perspective on man and psychological processes in living things. The present paper discusses contemporary psychology as an academic discipline, distinct from guidance, psychiatry, and related areas, as it relates to Adlerian theory.

## THE ACTIVE ORGANISM

Many of the changes in the past twenty years have moved psychology closer than it was before to a model of a behaving organism that is in line with Adlerian theory. Emerging within the constraints of 19th century philosophy of science, psychology gained momentum when American behaviorism emphasized adaptation. Even then, no matter how removed behaviorism seemed from Adlerian theory, the focus of psychology on a behaving organism rather than on an inner-directed mind (Wundtian structuralism) served an important step toward viewing the organism as active, outward-directed.

American functionalism in spawning behaviorism also gave this tenet for psychology: the organism is active, outward-going, rather than passive and unmodifiable. Early behaviorism and Adlerian psychology shared a common interest in activity, behavior. Subsequent research within behaviorism upheld this, by demonstrating the importance of the response relative to that of the stimulus. Decades of research in operant conditioning, verbal learning, and a variety of performance settings (8, 16, 22, 27) have demonstrated that the active, responding aspect of the organism is crucial in matters of learning and performance. Studies of the role of the stimulus and of the response in the S-R framework produced empirical evidence

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which highlights the importance of 'it is what you *do* that counts' so familiar in Adlerian theory and therapy (e.g., 1; 2, p. 148; 5, p. 58).

The ramifications of this formulation and its empirical support are wide indeed. Solomon (24) has shown that punishment has far more deleterious effects on sub-primate animals when they have been exposed to punishment in a context of non-responding than when they have first learned to make an instrumental response. It is as if learning not to respond, or learning to be helpless, made for far more serious consequences of punishment than when the subject is able to respond and act upon the environment. In a different context, Hess and Shipman (11) have shown that one of the most injurious aspects of lower-class Negro life in large cosmopolitan centers is the people's feeling of helplessness. Thus, in a variety of ways, the importance of an active organism has been verified.

#### STIMULUS SELECTION

A major discrepancy between behaviorism and Adlerian theory has, however, remained. Modern behaviorism, like its predecessor in the '20's and '30's, has advanced a one-directional model of the influence of the environment on behavior. Whether S-R or S-O-R, the behavioristic model has assumed that environmental inputs come into the organism and go out of it as behavior. A mediational model (19) may give a picture wherein environmental inputs are greatly transformed from the time the individual receives them until they leave as behavior. This gives the "O" in the S-O-R model a far greater role than that of being merely a passive conductor of environmental forces, as is suggested by the simpler S-R model. Nevertheless, the mediational S-O-R model rests largely on a uni-directional process: inputs occur, the individual somehow processes them, and they emerge as some class of behavior.

This contrasts with the Adlerian conception of an active organism which organizes its inputs after they are picked up by the receptors (rather than passively responding to these inputs), thus in fact determining what is input.

This emphasis on selective biased apperception, on stimulus selection, has, until recently, stubbornly defied the assumptions and findings of scientific psychology. The argument used to be something like the following: How can central processes, like the brain, control what the eye sees? The brain can only control after the senses pass inputs to it, but it cannot monitor perception until then. In this way,

the environment strongly determines behavior. This formulation sees the organism as active only after the environment impinges on it, and represents a far more mechanistic and environmentally determined model than Adlerian theory asserts. It views the organism as a responder rather than a seeker.

#### FEEDBACK PROCESS

Adlerians have long argued that perceiving is selective, in line with the person's life style and his goal. He selects out what he perceives in an active, not passive or mechanical, way. Recent events in psychology have given this notion, once maverick and completely untenable, considerable support.

The threads that have come together to shape this new direction derive from different roots than those of behaviorism and uni-directional determinism. Since World War II, engineering and mathematical disciplines have made an inroad into psychology, in contrast to the prior influence of a biological orientation and the study of animals.

Out of this newer influence has come a view of man far more congenial to Adlerian theory than any model behaviorism or structuralism devised. Rather than assuming a uni-directional S-R process, some of the newer contributions argue for a feedback process, best illustrated by the concept of TOTE and a very Adlerian-like book, *Plans and the Structure of Behavior* by Miller, Galanter, & Pribram (15).

The feedback model assumes that inputs are monitored by a central process which acts upon the sensing process and selects which events are inputs. The physiological model to make this psychological process feasible has been advanced by Pribram (21), and in a number of ways the information-seeking, stimulus-selection processes of an active organism have been argued as necessary for the explanation of behavior (4, 7, 20).

This general approach emphasizes that the organism is "self-organizing" rather than externally organized by an environment. Computer technology, though mechanical in its hardware, has nevertheless permitted psychology a model of behavior that is probably less mechanical than that advanced by a biological orientation of earlier animal studies. This is not to say that psychology has arrived at a model that is final or complete. But it is moving toward more sophisticated means of scientifically coming to grips with the complexities of human functioning that Adlerian theory has long insisted upon as the natural domain of a serious science of psychology.

## CENTRAL PROCESSES

Another noteworthy change can be described in terms of Hilgard's delineation of psychological theories as central versus peripheral in orientation (12). Though Skinner, with his extreme peripheralist position, has grown widely in influence in recent years, affecting education and child psychology as well as the more typical animal learning studies, modern trends have concurrently shown an intensified interest in central processes. Whereas thinking and cognition were once concepts of dubious scientific repute, and the assumption of man as a strategist and decision maker was considered folklore rather than science, thinking, cognition, decision making are today actively investigated in countless and exciting research projects conducted in reputable and well-funded research laboratories here and abroad. At the physiological level, studies involve direct stimulation of brain centers, so as better to define central processes in relation to environmental inputs and behavioral outputs. Only through these many and diverse centralist efforts can psychology produce a model of the human organism that even closely approximates the planning, future-oriented, symbolic, active, striving organism that Adlerian psychology says man is.

## EXPECTANCY, PURPOSE

Although in the area of motivation the discrepancy between general psychology and Adlerian theory is probably as great as in any single category, perceptible changes toward congruence can be noted. Where not long ago hedonistic and/or homeostatic drives were emphasized, and deprivation rather than incentive was held to be the key motivating source, in recent years the emphasis has shifted from deprivation-produced drives toward positive striving (e.g., 4, 10) and incentive motivation (25). Expectancy, though not quite yet a reputable construct, is being heard as an explanatory utterance at scientific meetings at an increasing rate. Thus the time may not be far off when purpose will be a generally tenable construct. In fact, Newell's "general problem solver" (17) and various cognitive models based on a subject's matching information with some criterion outcome, have implicit or explicit the notion of goal, expectancy, purpose. If one can tell a computer "stop when  $X = Y + 1$ " or "get information until you have solved the problem," and computers can match their own performance against some pre-defined criterion, then goals as behavioral outcomes do not seem as metaphysical as was thought

only a brief span of time ago. Moreover, physiologists seem to be optimistic about being able to give expectancy not only computer-hardware but also neurological legitimacy (18).

#### OTHER VARIABLES

Many other changes have occurred in modern psychology that are in line with Adlerian theory. Too numerous to mention in detail or even to list exhaustively, a few will be given brief reference here.

Regarding research efforts dealing with social processes, so basic a topic to Adlerian psychology, whereas twenty years ago the knowledge of family dynamics and small-group processes was indeed scant, and diadic and triadic relationships were infrequently studied for their effect on members' behavior, today there is a fast growing literature. Even competition and alliance, hardly touched as research areas at one time, now find sophisticated empirical investigation, growing in part out of developments in game theory (13). Though current social and family research does not fully bear on Adlerian concepts in these areas, and sibling relations are still not studied in the dynamic way called for by Adlerian theory (see 6 for a first attempt), the emerging trends are in that direction.

Adlerian psychology, concerned as it is with the perception of wholes, has always been close to Gestalt psychology. For a long time American psychology considered Gestalt notions of dubious validity or productiveness. However, serious efforts have been devoted in recent years which give Gestalt concepts renewed vitality (3, 7, 8).

Punishment, considered ineffective and inadvisable in a training and educative process by Adlerian theory and practice from its beginning, has received empirical study and been found indeed to have complex and often undesirable effects on behavior (23). Creativity, a topic Adlerians embraced strongly even though scientific psychology eschewed it as suggesting too much a vitalism that had no place in 20th century psychology, has been recently given serious study (9, 14) and put into application for innovation in a wide variety of settings (e.g., 26).

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

For the Adlerian, plan and long-range goals are clearly of major importance; life style would not be a tenable construct otherwise. The focus is on an active, response-oriented, organism, with distinct goals, plans, and purposes, and concepts of life and people (highly

developed central processes); on perceptual patterning and perception of wholes; on biased apperception; and on the patterned interplay between perception and goal, rather than only on the O and the R of the S-O-R model.

The present brief review of contemporary academic psychology and its relationship to Adlerian psychology is inevitably fragmentary. Clearly, the selection of topics and evidence has been biased. Nevertheless, some trends and themes do emerge, pointing in directions Adlerian theory many decades ago would have predicted.

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