

ADLER AND THE 1910 VIENNA SYMPOSIUM ON SUICIDE  
A SPECIAL REVIEW<sup>1, 2</sup>

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The small volume of Discussions of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society *On Suicide* has now appeared in English, after having been published originally in 1910 (20). A project of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, it has been translated by several people and edited by Paul Friedman, M.D., Ph.D., who also wrote the foreword.

For us the main significance of this publication is that it sheds light on an important period in the life of Alfred Adler—if we study it together with the *Minutes of the Society* (17) which were so carefully taken down by Otto Rank, in the context of some other material referring to this period, and in consultation with the German original.

We learn from the *Minutes* that Adler was elected president of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society by acclamation, on April 6, 1910, at one of its regular weekly meetings, following Freud's suggestion. At the same meeting and also on his suggestion, Freud had been elected scientific chairman by acclamation (17, p. 470). The next meeting, April 14, was devoted exclusively to Society business.

The following week, April 20, the first scientific program under Adler's presidency took place, with Adler as chairman (17, p. 491). The main speaker was David E. Oppenheim, a high school professor of classics; his topic was "Suicide in Childhood" on the basis of a book of that title by a Dr. A. Baer (17, p. 481). The discussion was continued throughout the next meeting, April 27.

At the end of the first meeting Adler raised the question "of whether the valuable suggestions and conclusions of this discussion should not, under the direction of a committee, be published as a pamphlet" (17, p. 497). At the end of the second meeting Stekel, who was then in the chair, requested "that what has been said be put to—

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<sup>1</sup>*On Suicide, with Particular Reference to Suicide among Young Students.* With contributions by Alfred Adler and others. Edited by Paul Friedman. New York: International Universities Press, 1967. Pp. 141. \$3.00.—Because of the complexity of the title page the Library of Congress listing has been consulted and followed here.

<sup>2</sup>This investigation was supported by Public Health Service Research Grant No. MH-14330-01 from the National Institute of Mental Health, which is here-with gratefully acknowledged.

gether in a pamphlet" (17, p. 506), apparently reminding the participants to prepare their contributions for publication.

The material was published in the fall of that year as No. 1 of a short-lived series entitled *Discussions of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society*, edited by the Board of Directors (a phrase omitted from the translation), with a preface to the series by the new president, Adler, and signed by him "on behalf of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society" (p. 32).<sup>3</sup>

In this preface which is thus not specific to suicide Adler defends the early publication of such discussions with their "conflicting conclusions" (p. 29) on the basis that "the anticipation of immediate criticism fosters a strict discipline of ideas" (p. 30). He continues in the original: "In scientific questions we do not wish to be respected or examined for our belief and authority, but demand honest criticism and scrutiny" (20, p. 4). In the present translation the first part becomes somewhat limited and distorted. "On *the* scientific questions *at issue*, we do not wish to be *judged* or tested on the basis of belief *or* authority" (p. 31; words at variance from the original are italicized).

In conclusion Adler says: "The preconditions for the practice of the psychoanalytic method are: accurate knowledge of the child's psyche and its development, including the sex drive, and the art to deny to personal trains of thought any influence on the examination, and instead to let oneself be guided by the thoughts and emotional life of the patient. The rest certainly must be accomplished by training and sensitivity" (20, p. 4). This contains a remarkably phenomenological statement, closely paraphrasing Husserl. Interestingly the present translation imports here some terms which Adler had not used, thereby changing the meaning to a certain extent. The translation speaks of "the ability to prevent personal ideas from influencing the *analysis* . . . In addition, *psychoanalysis* calls for training and psychological sensitivity" (p. 32).

On the whole then Adler's preface had a broader psychological tenor, alluding to his independence and carefully referring only to "psychoanalytic method," not psychoanalytic theory—while the translation imposes psychoanalytic limitations.

The editor of the translation introduces the phrase "1910 Symposium on Suicide" (p. 9). This term perhaps makes the event look more special than it was. It was simply one of the weekly discussion meetings which Freud initiated in 1902 and in which frequently a

<sup>3</sup>Where only a page reference is given this refers to the book under review.

recent book was discussed, as in the present case. It was also not unique that the discussion on a given topic might extend over more than one evening. At any event, at the first suicide meeting 15 members were present of whom 11 participated in the discussion (it was at one time the rule that everyone present should participate in the discussion); at the second meeting, two of the first group were absent, while there was one new member, 14 in all. There was also one guest at each meeting. Keeping this informality in mind, we shall follow the designation of symposium.

#### ADLER'S PART IN THE SYMPOSIUM

Adler was chairman of the first meeting of the symposium, as mentioned, and later its editor. The main speaker, Professor Oppenheim, joined the Adlerian group when it was formed a year later (13, p. 134), and Carl Furtmüller, the most extensive discussant after Wilhelm Stekel, was Adler's closest friend of this period. Furtmüller became co-editor with Adler of the first volume of collected Adlerian papers (3) and wrote the preface for it. Furthermore, among the eight contributors to the published symposium only four remained with the Psychoanalytic Society beyond the next two years: Freud, Josef K. Friedjung, Rudolf Reitler, and J. Sadger. Oppenheim and Furtmüller formed with Adler in 1911 what shortly afterwards became the Society of Individual Psychology; while Stekel resigned in 1912 on his own. Finally, and most tellingly, of the 108 present symposium pages, 85 pages are by those who seceded, while only 23 pages are by Freud and those who remained with him. Freud's contribution in two parts adds up to less than three of the very small pages of the present book.

#### *Adler's Friends*

The theses presented by Adler's friends were essentially the following. Oppenheim defended the schools against the accusation that they were to blame for the frequency of suicides among students. "Family life is the decisive factor in the etiology of student suicides, and academic failure never provides more than the occasion which triggers the catastrophe . . . Even our superficial inquiries have sufficiently demonstrated the influence of domestic conditions . . . to warrant the demand that prophylactic measures begin in the home" (p. 50). On the other hand, the publicity given to suicides among

students may exert a suggestion to those who are endangered and may see in this deed a way to enhance their self-esteem. "Consider its effect on a young person . . . just when he is beginning to feel himself a man and is searching for a suitable means of gratifying his new-found pride. If he is unable to find such gratification in school, he is shown a way of obtaining it by spiting the school. He takes the hint and picks up his pistol" (p. 59).

Furtmüller, after having deplored the overcrowding of schools and lack of individual treatment of the pupils, continued: "We remember what Dr. Adler has to say about the role played by the feeling of inferiority. . . . Our present education system . . . tends to reinforce this feeling of inferiority, and . . . tends to undermine self-confidence" (pp. 126-127).

#### *Adler's Contribution*

Adler offered additional dynamics describing suicide in fact as a form of communication: "Sickness, even death, is desired, partly in order to hurt the relatives, and partly to show them what they have lost in the one they have always slighted. . . . In later years it is no longer the parents, but the teacher, or some beloved person, or society, or the world at large, that is taken as the object of this act of revenge" (p. 119).

Adler's starting point, made "with complete confidence" (p. 112), was that suicide is essentially another manifestation of the "neurotic disposition," what he later often called "the pampered style of life" (2, pp. 241-242). Such an individual may "tendentiously create situations in which [he] is positively dependent on the help of others. . . . Their longing for sympathy and preferential treatment can become so intense that they learn to value sickness as a means of focusing the interest of the environment on themselves and at the same time as an excuse to evade every decision" (pp. 114-115). "In all cases, in neurotics, extremely gifted persons, and in would-be suicides, I could show that at the beginning of childhood they had a particularly deep-seated feeling of inferiority" (p. 116; translation modified after 3, p. 360).

Adler concludes: "Suicide like neurosis is a childish form of reaction to a childish overestimation of motives, humiliations, and disappointments. And thus suicide—exactly like neurosis and psychosis—represents a safeguard to avoid by asocial means the struggle of life with its frustrations" (p. 121; translation modified after 3, p. 363).

*Adler's Later Contribution*

These passages rather closely foreshadow Adler's ultimate formulations, the main difference being that what was then indicated only as "asocial means" achieved much greater significance as "lack of social interest." Thus we find him summarizing 27 years later: "Suicide is a solution only for one who in the face of an urgent problem has arrived at the end of his limited social interest" (1, p. 250).

Reduced to the simplest form, the life style of the potential suicide is characterized by the fact that he hurts others by dreaming himself into injuries or by administering them to himself. One will seldom go wrong in determining against whom the attack is aimed when one has found who is actually affected most by it. We find in the suicide the type who thinks too much of himself, too little of others, and who is unable sufficiently to play, function, live, and die with others. Rather, with an exaggerated consciousness of his own worth, he expects with great tension results which are always favorable to him (1, p. 252).

Adler says in fact, the patient really does not want death as such. He wants to create a certain effect, wants to drive home a message, still wants to achieve a goal of success. If he could do this in some way other than by taking his life, he would gladly resort to it. This implies for the therapist that he "must see to it that something is done for the patient to enable him to find a better, more independent, socially oriented attitude toward life" (1, p. 252). A case history submitted by Farberow and Shneidman to representatives of various schools of thought was discussed from this point of view by the present reviewer (4).

This Adlerian approach is very much in line with present-day thinking on suicide prevention. Accordingly it was also two young Adlerians, Rudolf Dreikurs and Viktor Frankl, who around 1928 were among the first psychiatrists who were involved in organizations for the prevention of suicide (9, pp. 136-138). Dreikurs actually was interested in suicide prevention prior to joining Adler; Frankl was connected with Adler at the time of his interest in suicide prevention (6).

*Freud's Symposium Contribution*

To return to the symposium, Freud, in his final lines, had only words of caution. Stating that the condition of melancholia should be the basis for understanding suicide, he concluded: "The affective processes in melancholia . . . and the vicissitudes undergone by the libido in that condition, are totally unknown to us" (pp. 140-141). His paper on "Mourning and Melancholia" (10) was not published until seven years later.

In fairness to Freud it must, however, also be mentioned that immediately following Oppenheim's presentation he commented on the psychological obligations of the secondary school, while in doing so he left aside merely intrapsychic psychoanalytic considerations as such. Freud held that "A secondary school should achieve more than not driving its pupils to suicide. It should give them a desire to live and should offer them support and backing at a time of life at which the conditions of their development compel them to relax their ties with their parental home and their family." The school should arouse "interest in life in the world outside . . . must never forget that it has to deal with immature individuals who cannot be denied a right to linger at certain stages of development . . . must not take on itself the inexorable character of life: it must not seek to be more than a *game* of life" (p. 61).

Essentially, the symposium was then Adler's event. No wonder he considered it valuable enough for a special publication, while Freud in his few final words recommended, "Let us suspend our judgment" (p. 141). Also, the three main contributions (aside from Stekel's), by Oppenheim, Adler, and Furtmüller, were subsequently included in the previously mentioned first volume of collected Adlerian papers (3, pp. 341-373).

#### MINIMIZING ADLER'S PART

The English edition shows very little awareness of the Adlerian cast of the symposium. The editor, Paul Friedman, mentions in his foreword only that Adler and Stekel "started the secession from the movement" (p. 11) a short while later.

#### *The Role of the Educators*

No mention is made of the fact that Oppenheim and Furtmüller were friends of Adler who resigned with him the following year (13, p. 134). In fact, while in the original publication both used pseudonyms—Unus Multorum and Dr. phil. Karl Molitor, respectively—only Oppenheim is identified in the present edition. Furtmüller is not, although his name could have been ascertained from the volume of Adlerian papers (3, p. 363). Incidentally, reason for the pseudonyms was perhaps that both authors were teachers and as such did not want to show themselves involved in these discussions at the time.

Adler from the start saw psychotherapy as an educational problem and recognized the potentially enormous mental health function

of the schools. His first volume of collected papers opens with an article entitled "The Physician as Educator" written in 1904 (3, pp. 1-10). This closeness to education is reflected in the fact that his friends on this symposium were educators. On the other hand, the three participants who remained with Freud were all medical doctors.

The editor of the present volume points out, "What makes this presentation so meaningful today . . . is the significant role in which the educator cast himself in 1910 . . . Here the teacher assigned to himself the historical role of a psychoanalytic catalyst in the process of linking school and home. Professor Oppenheim could stand before us today . . ." (pp. 24-25). But the editor fails to recognize that the educators of this symposium were the Adlerians of the following year and as such emphasized problems of ego psychology—exactly what Freud elsewhere held against Adler (2, p. 71; 8; 13, p. 266), as well as against Stekel (17, p. 401).

Friedman also points out that Professor Oppenheim was "co-author with Freud of *Dreams in Folklore* (1911)" (p. 13n). But he does not mention that this paper (11) was quite atypical for Freud in that it was concerned with an ego function of dreams, namely, with "dreams in folklore in which the dreamer awakened to find himself actually doing things similar to what he had been dreaming about" (14). Nor does Friedman mention that this paper had disappeared among the effects of Professor Oppenheim until forty-five years later, and that this is ascribed by J. Strachey, its editor, as undoubtedly due to "the fact that soon afterwards Oppenheim became an adherent of Adler's" (11, p. 21).

Adler's side in the symposium is thus underplayed in the present volume, as it has been completely ignored by Ernest Jones whose account mentions only the paper read by Oppenheim (13, p. 245).

#### *Undue Credit to Freud*

On the other hand, the part of Freud is overplayed as much as his contribution of less than three pages permits. Adler's preface in the present edition is preceded by a page listing the "Members of the Symposium." This list begins with "Professor Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Chairman" (p. 27). Yet this page is inauthentic. The original (19) contains no such page. Neither is there any indication in the original or in the *Minutes* that Freud had been chairman. As we showed earlier, the *Minutes* mentioned Adler as chairman at the first meeting, and Stekel, at the second. The page in question is then a

later construction, without having been made recognizable as such. One might suspect this from the dates of the members' life spans following their names; but then again, merely the dates might have been added later to an original page. The error from this page is carried into the editor's foreword in the statement that "this was one of the last meetings of the original group of associates at which Freud presided" (p. 11).

The original publication only lists the contributors alphabetically on the title page, beginning with Alfred Adler, which is correctly rendered in the translation. Also, in both editions the preface to the series is signed by Adler.

The erroneous listing of Freud as chairman can of course be explained from presuppositions. The fact that Freud spoke the final words may have supported these further. Yet there should have been an explanation as to why Freud would be chairman and presumably take a leading interest in a symposium in which he spoke so little, and then only words of caution as far as psychoanalytic opinion was concerned. Friedman himself comments on this: "One is particularly struck by Freud's reticence at this Symposium" (p. 23n).

But the translation itself also reflects bias. We have shown some evidence of this at the beginning. Presently we should like to point in addition to a change in an order of names. In the original, Adler speaks correctly of "the work of Breuer and Freud" (7; reference supplied by us) as the starting point of psychoanalysis (20, p. 3). In the translation this has become "the work of Freud and Breuer" (p. 30). Freud apparently cannot be second, he must be first.

#### *Adler's Independence and Anticipation*

The shortcomings in the translation that we mentioned are from Adler's introduction to the series, to which we limited our examination. They have in common that they make Adler appear a better "Freudian" than he was. Actually, Adler's introduction with its very carefully chosen words is a considerable testimony to the independence of thought which he had always claimed (see 5; 12, pp. 336-339).

As we pointed out above, Adler talked specifically about the psychoanalytic method of investigation and experiences gained with it. He did not talk about psychoanalytic theory; libido and repression were not mentioned; the sex drive was pointedly mentioned only in a subordinate way, as being *included in* "the child's psyche and its development" (20, p. 4); and no particularly strong acknowledgment

was made of Freud. On the contrary, some priority was given to Breuer. "First used by Breuer, the 'psychoanalytic method' was subsequently developed by Freud and his school, and offers presently a tool for explaining psychological phenomena of the healthy and the ill" (20, p. 4).

The psychoanalytic method has recently been described by Judd Marmor as "open-ended verbal communication ('free association'), and painstaking exploration of dreams, fantasies, parapraxes, and the like," and Marmor is convinced that "the development of this methodological tool will be recognized as having been Freud's greatest contribution" (15, p. 5). It was precisely for the development of this tool that Adler prophetically gave Freud credit in the above. By accepting only this, however, Adler demonstrated his independence.

As we were concluding our review, another review of this book, by Erwin Stengel, appeared. Being familiar with some of the background of the book, Dr. Stengel was able to corroborate our position and devotes his short review almost exclusively to the contribution of Adler. After speaking of this volume as a "remarkable historical document," Dr. Stengel continues: "There was Adler . . . obviously unenthusiastic about the libido theory. . . . Alfred Adler must be given credit for having anticipated a good deal of social psychiatry. His ideas led away from the study of intrapsychic processes which Freud and his associates pursued. Only recently have psychoanalysts again turned their attention to interpersonal relations" (19).

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In 1910 the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society held a discussion on suicide which was published at that time as a monograph. Very commendably, this discussion, here called symposium, has now after all these years appeared in English, edited by Paul Friedman. There are eight contributors, among whom Freud is represented with essentially only a few words of caution, while Adler advances a theory of suicide which rather accurately foreshadows his later development.

The main shortcoming of the book is that it does not include editorially any of the historical circumstances surrounding this symposium, needed for a proper appreciation by the present-day reader. The reader is left uninformed that Adler was president of the Society at that time; that he presided at the first evening of the symposium; that the main speaker and one of the discussants seceded from the Society the following year together with Adler; that less than one

quarter of all the material of the symposium was by Freud and those who subsequently remained with him; and that Adler suggested the publication of the symposium originally and apparently became responsible for it. Perhaps not all these facts could have been available to the editor at the time. At any rate, however, the symposium can truly be called Adler's event.

On the other hand, there is bias in favor of Freud as reflected in shortcomings in the translation on several occasions. They amount essentially to a minimizing of the independence of Adler. The bias is reflected most strikingly in the insertion of a page on which Freud is listed as chairman, a page which does not exist in the original. Nor does the original give any other indication that Freud was chairman.

The book was published shortly before the recent First Annual Conference on Suicidology in Chicago, March 20, 1968. In view of what we have here pointed out about this book, it is very understandable that the conference was reported in one instance as "a 'reconvening' of the 1910 Vienna Symposium on Suicide presided over by Sigmund Freud" (18) and in another instance as "... held under the gavel of Sigmund Freud" (16). This certainly gave a wrong impression. It would have been more correct to report the conference as a reconvening of a symposium presided over, or under the gavel of, Alfred Adler the first evening, and Wilhelm Stekel the second evening, characterized by a strong Adlerian cast, where ideas were presented which are still so vital today because they did not focus on libido theory and intrapsychic processes but on the self and interpersonal relations.

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#### REPLY BY DR. PAUL FRIEDMAN

The remarks of Dr. Ansbacher are highly interesting, indeed, and I shall make use of some of them in the next edition, should there be one. Unfortunately, the small book was already in press at the time the second volume of the *Minutes* appeared. Therefore, I was not able to include in it an identifying footnote as to Dr. Molitor's name.

The same goes for my erroneous assumption that Freud was the one who presided and not Adler. According to the *Minutes*, the meeting of April 20, 1910 was indeed under the chairmanship of Adler (p. 491), and the continuation of this discussion that took place in the scientific meeting of April 27, 1910 was under the chairmanship of Stekel (p. 506). This mistake, made also in a French paper of mine in 1935,<sup>1</sup> probably resulted from the fact that Freud was the one who opened and closed the discussions, since nowhere in the original

<sup>1</sup>Sur le suicide. *Rev. franç. Psychoanal.*, 1935, 8, 106-148.

pamphlet, published by the Verlag von J. F. Bergmann, Wiesbaden, 1910, is the chairman specifically identified.

It was far from my intention to minimize Adler's role, or for that matter the roles played by Stekel and others in the development of modern psychological thinking. Did I not, in my introductory words, mention the fact that the most reticent of all participants was Freud himself, while Adler, Stekel, Oppenheim, Sadger, etc. contributed extraordinary and revolutionary ideas, which, however, had to be validated by subsequent clinical experience?

I must, again, emphasize, that my goal in publishing this volume was essentially to offer a complete and faithful translation of an important document in the history of psychoanalysis.

As to my remark that "the teacher has assigned to himself the historical role of a psychoanalytic catalyst in the process of linking school and home" (p. 25), I must again stress the fact that in so doing I was only being faithful to history, since at the time of the discussions the participants still belonged to the intimate circle of Freud's disciples. By the way, Dr. Ansbacher himself acknowledged that the 1910 discussions took place under the aegis of the psychoanalytic movement.

Most of the data Dr. Ansbacher mentions had been known to me, but I did not consider this the proper occasion to bring them out.

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