

# IMPLICATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY FOR THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST<sup>1</sup>

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Individual Psychology as originated by Alfred Adler (1), and developed further especially in techniques of dealing with children at home and at school by Rudolf Dreikurs (5), appears to us especially well suited to the work of the guidance counselor and school psychologist. We are thus presenting in the following an overview of the advantages of this approach for the various functions of these professionals. This will be preceded by a brief statement of the main principles of Individual Psychology and their early application in child guidance, and by a general delineation of the functions of the school psychologist. Previously the Grubbes (7, 8) have described the use of Adlerian psychology in the schools in a more general way and illustrated it with case material.

## THEORY AND EARLY APPLICATION TO CHILD GUIDANCE

The theory of Individual Psychology may be outlined through the following assumptions regarding the nature of man:

1. Personality is the individual's unique and self-consistent unity (2, p. 52).
2. Behavior is purposive and goal-directed. All things an individual does serve a purpose for him (2, p. 52).
3. "There is one basic dynamic force behind all human activity, a striving from a felt minus situation toward a plus situation, from a feeling of inferiority toward superiority, perfection, totality" (1, p. 1).
4. The individual is "striving for success in the solution of his problems, this striving being anchored in the very structure of life" (2, p. 24).
5. Man is socially embedded. He becomes what he is in interaction with other people. The individual should be perceived in his social context if he is to be understood. "We refuse to recognize and examine an isolated human being" (1, p. 2).

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on the author's doctoral dissertation (10).

6. Social interest, i.e., a concern for others and its expression in cooperation, is necessary for the solution of life's problems. "All problems of life merge into the three social problems of neighborly love, work, and sexual love. . . . Social interest, like all innate human potentialities, will develop in accordance with the individual's self-consistent style of life" (2, p. 15).

7. Each individual creates his own unique life style based on his subjective perception of himself and his environment, and what appears to him as success (2, p. 25).

8. In the healthy individual social interest "as the ultimate form of mankind . . . a normative ideal" gives direction to the striving. In mental disturbance, where social interest is lacking, striving is on the socially useless side (2, p. 35).

9. Inferiority feelings are present in all individuals. The minus situation gives the impetus to action (2, pp. 53-54).

10. People approach life with different degrees of activity (2, pp. 59-60).

Adler was probably the first psychiatrist to have applied himself to education, specifically of the child in the school situation. At the end of the First World War, in 1918, the subsequent social and political developments in the new Austrian republic were reflected also in the changes made in the school system and general approach to education (13, pp. 11-13). The basic change was in the spirit of education, from one of strict obedience to one of self-reliance and mutual help (9, pp. ix-x). In this climate Adler set up child-guidance clinics in the Vienna schools. The differentiating characteristic of these clinics was that Adler's purpose included introducing teachers and others to Individual Psychology as well as helping the children with academic or behavior problems. Since he felt that guidance which worked with the child alone was limited in effectiveness, his clinic sessions were open and attended by physicians, teachers, social workers, and parents who were seeking training (11). In this way he hoped to develop a cooperating relationship between all those who had influence on the development of children—and the children were found to benefit from this group approach.

#### FUNCTIONS OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

The *Report of the Thayer Conference* of 1954 (3) will be used here as reference for the functions of the school psychologist. These

have not changed appreciably since then, except that the mental health functions have become more prominent. Also, efforts have been directed toward training programs and certification requirements, and a number of new positions have been created, such as educational counselor and school adjustment counselor, to supplement the mental health aspects of the psychologist's functions.

The Report brings out two kinds of services: one directed to specific needs of the school children for which the psychologist himself must care; the other, "adding to the resources that other school personnel will use" (3, p. 30). Many school administrators wanted "more opportunity for in-service training of teachers, and for participation in developing the education program" (3, p. 33). They no longer considered testing the most pressing responsibility of the school psychologist and expressed growing awareness of the need to bring about better adjustment, to be accomplished through working with pupils and parents, and for a psychological consultant to the entire teaching staff. There was almost unanimity in judging existing services for preventive mental health work as inadequate (3, p. 37).

The following is a list of specific functions of the school psychologist, as gathered from the Report (3, principally pp. 174-176).

1. Administering and evaluating tests for assessment of the individual and of groups, in achievement, intelligence and other aptitudes, as well as personality, in order to "discover and gauge the needs of individuals and to evaluate changes."
2. Advising school personnel on educational objectives, curriculum and methods, especially as these relate to helping each child to "make the most of his opportunities and acquire healthy attitudes and feelings."
3. Working with exceptional children—the gifted, retarded, those with sensory defects and other physical handicaps—and helping the school to plan to provide for them.
4. Dealing with emotionally disturbed children. In this, the psychologist will have to help teachers and parents "to understand the nature of the interaction of their own personalities with those of the children."
5. Conducting in-service teacher training in individual and group behavior (3, p. 162).
6. Initiating and carrying on relevant research, time permitting.

7. Extending concern to the over-all mental health of the community, and community services for children and adults.

#### PRACTICAL DERIVATIONS FROM THE THEORY

A number of operational directives are easily derived from the Adlerian concepts stated initially, which are fully in accord with the mental health functions of the school psychologist, just described. Some of these apply to the psychologist's approach to the child, and some to his approach to the persons of significance to the child.

##### *Assumption of Self-Determination*

Probably the most important gain which any practicing psychologist derives from the thinking of Adler and others who follow him, is an optimistic outlook. This stems primarily from the degree of self-determination which is ascribed to the individual. "Not what a child brings with him, but what he makes of it, is decisive for his life style" (2, p. 293). Every given, whether it be hereditary, organic, an environmental influence, or any experience, depends on the individual's opinion of it. We choose the response we make. And if this is mistaken, can we not then also choose to correct it? The Adlerian therapist does not look backward, to causes in the past which cannot be changed, but forward, to goals in the future which, because they are only in the mind (fictive) *can* be changed, or to different ways of achieving these goals. Such a viewpoint is obviously equally helpful to all those who work with the therapist in trying to bring about changes in a child.

##### *Encouragement*

After the mistake in the child's style of life has been pointed out, as in Adler's early clinics, the child is not only not scolded for it, but is helped to understand why he is making it. He is then encouraged to develop the attitude that it is possible for him to correct his difficulty and be successful "on the useful side of life." The mistakes are viewed as due to inadequate preparation for certain situations in life. The child is helped to become both free from guilt and the feeling of being destined for failure, and is encouraged to work harder at a different, better way to solve his problems.

When teachers learn to view pupils' misbehavior as purposive, they come to understand both the pupils and themselves better. They can respond to the underlying specific problem more adequately

instead of becoming involved and confused in an immediate response to the behavior itself.

Encouragement is central in the practice of Individual Psychology. Maladjustment is conceived as developing when the individual is discouraged to the extent that he feels he cannot succeed through socially contributive responses to the tasks of life. In a plan of treatment it is necessary to find as many ways as possible to encourage the individual in order that he may gather evidence of his own worth. This approach must be communicated by the psychologist to all the other related persons.

#### *Brevity of Treatment*

The relative speed with which an understanding of the individual case, what might be called "diagnosis," can be arrived at, and the relatively short period of re-education are perhaps the greatest assets of Individual Psychology next to its effectiveness. This is certainly of the essence for the school psychologist. The diagnostic approach is not one of formalized testing, but of a number of crucial simple questions. It can be much briefer than other approaches inasmuch as it is based on the holistic concept of a self-consistent life style including some over-all goal. Thus every manifestation of the individual is related to his whole personality, and is to some extent representative of it. It is therefore unnecessary to be exhaustive in fact-gathering or to "probe deeply." The significant questions deal with the subject's earliest recollections, birth-order position and a description of the family constellation, as well as his presenting problem, and any other difficulties in his daily life.

#### *Subordination of the Emotions*

Emotional problems, often viewed as particularly difficult to deal with, are de-emphasized as such in the Adlerian approach inasmuch as self-determination also implies determination of the emotions by the individual himself, although this is not done consciously. People create their emotions to serve specific purposes; emotions only seem to be the master, while in reality they are but the tools. Individuals need emotions to act with conviction, to support their self-chosen goals, and to fortify themselves against obstacles. When reason and emotion seem to oppose each other, this apparent opposition may be serving as an excuse for our actions—or inaction. A cognitive reorganization brings with it the appropriate change in emotion.

*Natural and Logical Consequences*

To allow the child to experience the immediate consequences of his behavior is of the greatest value in a training approach. In this way the child learns, without the intervention of others, how well, or badly, he is fitting into the reality and order of his world. With this insight the psychologist can easily facilitate the child's learning by structuring situations so as to insure an impressive consequence of misbehavior which, by its very nature, is in conflict with either natural laws or socially validated regulations. This technique can easily be explained to parents and teachers, and be adopted by them.

*Assigning Responsibility*

The focus of responsibility should remain on the learner if an experience is to have meaning for him. "All of us are inclined to underestimate our abilities, as well as those of our children. Children become irresponsible only if we fail to let them take on responsibility. They are parasites only to the extent to which we serve them unduly" (6, p. 26).

*Stressing Inter-Relatedness*

The appreciation of a human's social embeddedness translates itself into the recognition that the significant people—parents, siblings, teachers, etc.—in the child's life must be included in a plan of treatment as well as in understanding his case. Understanding, from the viewpoint of Individual Psychology, focuses on the child in relation to his social environment. Adler's response to being told a patient was disorderly as a child, illustrates this well: "One sees the shadow of another person who picked up after him . . . You can explain to him, 'You were disorderly, you passed on your obligation to others. It is still the same today' " (2, p. 196). In fact, the actual treatment of the child, in all but the more serious cases, is left to the teacher and the parent, since they have the most contact with the child. The psychologist's role is to arrive at the specific recommendations for a re-educational plan which the significant others are capable of carrying out.

*Communicating Understanding*

The simple profoundness of Individual Psychology allows it to make operational contributions to people with different levels of

education and experience, both professional and personal. It does not have a technical vocabulary which would be difficult for an untrained person to understand. Adler and others have written on three levels: for highly trained people in psychology and psychiatry; for other professionals such as school administrators, teachers, and social workers; and for lay people, mainly parents. Adlerian concepts themselves, because they are less inferential than Freudian concepts or those of other schools, are more easily translated into concrete terms. It is easier to explain, that is to reduce to concrete operational terms, the dynamics of the pampering situation than the Oedipal relationship.

Since Individual Psychology places just about equal emphasis on subjective attitudes and objective behavior, the objective or concrete elements in understanding are never absent, and hence the possibility likewise always exists for checking one's interpretations by further observation or consensus.

#### *Rationale for Group Work*

Since Individual Psychology recognizes all of life's problems as social problems, group work is ideally suited, not only to disclose and focus on the nature of a problem, but also to offer a corrective influence. Mistaken concepts and values are at the basis of human failures, and a group is a value-forming agent. It influences the beliefs of its members. This was true even of the group of onlookers at Adler's clinics. While conducting an interview with a child, he would sometimes turn to the audience and ask if anyone had experienced similar difficulties as a child. In the discussion which developed, the child, who had most often felt himself the object of adult disapproval, would find himself instead the center of an understanding group, some of whom disclosed that they had known equally bad failures. The children were found to benefit from this approach.

Individuals tend to be more aware of how people are reacting to them than to how they are affecting others: group confrontation apprises them of this. Feelings of inferiority are most effectively counteracted in a group setting, for the feeling of belonging as a contributing member is essential for well-being. As long as one can move in a field where his personal adequacy is not questioned, he does not need the safeguards which are necessary for him in alienating circumstances (4, pp. 99-100). According to Adlerian principles, in a therapeutic group the social atmosphere must be one of equality,

so that distance and competitive behavior will give way to mutual encouragement.

The school psychologist is continuously dealing with group-situations. He can count upon the advantages of group dynamics when he meets in conference with a teacher and pair of parents; with parents for study and discussion of common problems with their children; with teachers as a part of in-service training; with five to ten children having academic or social problems; with three to five very withdrawn young children in play therapy—among other interpersonal relationships. The psychologist can also conduct classroom meetings which utilize group dynamics, or help the teacher to do this, or train the children to run their own meetings, to make the classroom a group entity which can aid in developing mutual understanding and helpfulness among its members (12).

The members of all these groups learn from the experiences of others, and a feeling of mutuality develops when troubled individuals find that others have similar problems—frequently worse than their own. In our experience there was significant improvement in the quality of the marital relationships of the parents attending group discussions, due to their realization that a cooperative consistent approach to child training was essential if their children were to be helped. Persons tend to overcome their resistance to change by observing similar resistance in others.

#### SUMMARY

The theory of the school psychologist should lead directly to practice, so that he can suggest concrete, realistic measures for desirable behavior changes on the part of pupils and staff. It must give the psychologist an understanding of the exceptional or problem child which can be readily communicated to people who are not sophisticated in personality theory, such as the teachers, administrators, parents, siblings, and pupils, who are involved with the child, so that they too, can function more effectively and help him to change and grow in a socially desirable direction. The theory of Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler has been found eminently suited for all these functions by the present school-psychologist writer.

Its optimistic principles, its socially useful directives, its briefer methods of understanding and therapy, and its ready application to group situations also help the school psychologist to make the best

use of his time in meeting the great demands for promoting mental health.

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