

IMPLICATIONS OF ADLERIAN THEORY FOR  
AN UNDERSTANDING OF CIVIL RIGHTS  
PROBLEMS AND ACTION<sup>1</sup>

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Without question, the most significant and persistent influence on my own thoughts and activities as a social psychologist has been the social dynamic theories of Alfred Adler. I was introduced to the writings of Adler by Professor Francis Cecil Sumner (1895-1954) who initiated me into the field of psychology when I was an undergraduate at Howard University during the early 1930's. The late Professor Sumner was one of the wisest, most scholarly students of psychology I have ever known. He shared with Alfred Adler the fact of being woefully underestimated and unsung, while more flamboyant, fashionable or deliberately obscure or detached social and psychological theorists were being lionized by intellectual faddists and cults. He also shared with him the view that a relevant psychology must be concerned with the destiny and fulfillment of man and society, and the profound hope that man had the capacity to use his rational powers to develop a just and viable society.<sup>2</sup>

While I was still an undergraduate, Sumner's interpretation of psychodynamic theories—and particularly the clarity with which he presented and interpreted Adlerian theory—struck a response within me which caused me to decide to become a psychologist instead of a physician. In looking back on the basis of this decision of a college junior, the following factors seem salient:

Adlerian theory provided me with the unifying approach to the problems of the nature of the human predicament and its personal and social paradoxes which I was desperately seeking.

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<sup>1</sup>Address to the American Society of Adlerian Psychology, 15th Annual Meeting, New York, Academy of Medicine, May 26, 1967, commemorating the 30th anniversary of Alfred Adler's death, May 28, 1937.

<sup>2</sup>An idea of Professor Sumner's thinking can be gained from his survey of European psychology on the topic of "Religion and Psychiatry." He found secular and ecclesiastical psychotherapy to agree on the notion of "the losing of one's soul in order to save it" (13, p. 817), and he quotes among others an Adlerian version of this insight, namely, the recognition of "the healing power of a courageous subduing of egotism in service to society" (13, p. 816).

Adlerian theory made it possible for me to see the unity among the various ways in which man sought understanding and mastery of his physical and social environment through religion, philosophy and science.

Adlerian theory made it possible for me to see and believe in the social, moral and technological relevance of the field of psychology.

My introduction to the theories of Alfred Adler was a turning point in my personal and intellectual life. Adlerian ideas have dominated my professional writings and my actions as a person and as a psychologist from my undergraduate days up to the present.

It seems necessary to introduce this discussion of the role of the theories of Alfred Adler in the American civil rights movement with these personal observations because my own involvement in the civil rights movement has been primarily as a psychologist who has sought to bridge the gap between psychological theory, insights and findings on the one hand, and civil rights policy and action on the other hand. To the extent that I have been able to make any contribution to the theoretical and moral assumptions upon which the struggle for racial justice in America has been based, it has been primarily through the appropriate modification and use of the Adlerian perspective and conceptual framework. To the extent that Adlerian theory influenced my own thinking and research, and to the extent that my thoughts and writings have influenced in any way the civil rights movement, determines, at least in part, the extent to which ideas of Alfred Adler have contributed to the accelerated quest for racial justice in America.

#### UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH RACIAL HOSTILITY

Basic Adlerian ideas concerning the deep feelings of inferiority which plague man and the various devices by which he seeks to compensate for the gnawing sense of self-doubt have general implications for an understanding of the general problems of race relations in America and the various ways in which man's inhumanity to man manifests itself throughout the world. In addition, Adler at times spoke rather directly on these issues. For example:

Those who have travelled have found that people everywhere are approximately the same in that they are always inclined to find something by which to degrade others. Everyone seeks a means which permits him to elevate himself at little

cost. The Frenchman considers the German inferior, whereas the German, in turn, considers himself as belonging to a chosen nation; the Chinaman disdains the Japanese . . . Until mankind consents to take a step forward in its degree of civilization, these hostile trends [prejudices] must be considered not as specific manifestations, but as the expression of a general and erroneous human attitude (2, p. 452; original source, differently translated, 1, pp. 111-112).

Adler specified the conditions which increased the chances of hostility in man toward his fellow man and provided the basis for understanding some of the dynamics of racial hostility among whites in America. The depth of his insights can be seen by the following:

Difficulties in earning a livelihood, bad working conditions, inadequate educational and cultural facilities, a joyless existence, and continuous irritation, all these factors increase the feeling of inferiority, produce oversensitivity, and drive the individual to seek "solutions." . . . The class struggle is carried on by groups made up of individuals whose quest for an inwardly and outwardly balanced mode of life is thwarted. Such mass movements, in turn producing further disturbing motives in the individuals, proceed with a firm and resolute step toward destructive aims. Destruction means to the masses a release from situations felt intolerable and thus appears to them as a preliminary condition of improvement (2, pp. 452-453).

There was early evidence that Adler was never content with abstract theorizing and never permitted himself the luxury of either clinical isolation from the very real problems of man or acceptance of the most profound insights as ends in themselves. Adler insisted upon seeking to understand the dynamics of man, as a means toward helping man to move toward justice and dignity in his relations with his fellow man. His concern with and compassion for the victims of social injustice can best be illustrated by the following:

When I have had occasion to talk with individuals of oppressed races, as with Jews and Negroes, I have called their attention to the very great tendency to oppress one's neighbor . . . We know that children with red hair are exposed to teasing from which they then suffer. This is one of many ancient superstitions which represent gross errors. One must explain to such children that there is a whole series of injustices in mankind, that people often find a means of oppressing others, and that this always takes the same form. If one people wants to depreciate another, if one family considers itself superior to another, then they stress particular traits to use as a point of attack. . . . The red-haired boy must understand that he is not there to serve as a target for the others in letting them irritate him. It is the same all through life; if someone shows irritation, the attack persists. The red-haired boy must consider the attack on account of his hair as a sign of stupidity on the part of the one who launches it (2, pp. 454-455; original source, differently translated, 1, pp. 104 & 111).

I have used the above insight as a basis for guiding and protecting my own children against the venom of racial prejudice in America. I have tried to explain to them not without some success, I believe, that attacks and insults directed against them on the basis of their color do not indicate any lack on their part, but rather reflect a profound pathos and inferiority on the part of those who must seek to bolster a sagging self-esteem by attempting to humiliate others.

#### RESEARCH AND SUPREME COURT DECISION

There are many specific examples of the profound effect of Adlerian thought on my own work as a psychologist. I was first aware of the extent to which Adler had influenced my perspective of man and society, and specifically my thinking on the American race problem, when I wrote a paper as an undergraduate on the manifestations of feelings of inferiority among Negroes. I developed these ideas further for a paper which I wrote when I was a graduate student in the department of psychology at Columbia University. I submitted this later paper to Otto Klineberg, who was my major professor at Columbia. This paper became the basis of a series of discussions with Professor Klineberg. Out of these discussions developed a friendship which persists to this day and which strengthened my commitment to use my training and skills as a psychologist in the attempt to bring about observable changes in the predicament of the Negroes in America and to contribute whatever I could in improving the general moral climate within which American children of all races and religions are required to grow.

In the 1940's soon after I received my doctorate from Columbia University, my wife, Dr. Mamie P. Clark, and I conducted research on racial identification and preference in Negro children (8, 9, 10, 11, 12). This research was designed to test empirically some hypotheses which were essentially Adlerian. For example, we sought to determine the extent to which the inferior status to which Negro children were relegated in American society became incorporated into their developing self-image and influenced their motivation and personal effectiveness. The findings of this series of studies clearly supported the basic ideas of Adler, namely, that human beings who are treated as inferior develop intensified feelings of inferiority and are likely to engage in a variety of compensatory devices in the attempt to salvage some semblance of dignity and self-esteem.

In 1950, I prepared a report for the Midcentury White House

Conference on Children and Youth on the effects of prejudice, discrimination and segregation on personality development of American children, Negro and white (5). This report brought together the then available research findings and speculations on the personality problems and pressures which a society of institutionalized social injustices imposed upon their children. A revised version of this report has appeared in book form in *Prejudice and Your Child* (6). The unifying theoretical theme which made the findings from the various studies cited in this report coherent and eventually useful was that of Adlerian psychodynamic theory.

This report was used as the basis for a social science appendix to the brief submitted by the lawyers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to the United States Supreme Court in the school desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (4). This appendix was prepared by Stuart Cook, Isidor Chein, and myself and reviewed and endorsed by 32 American social scientists.<sup>3</sup> It might be of value in demonstrating the direct impact of Adlerian theory on this issue to quote at length from this social science brief which summarizes the report:

The report indicates that as minority group children learn the inferior status to which they are assigned—as they observe the fact that they are almost always segregated and kept apart from others who are treated with more respect by the society as a whole—they often react with feelings of inferiority and a sense of personal humiliation. Many of them become confused about their own personal worth. On the one hand, like all other human beings they require a sense of personal dignity; on the other hand, almost nowhere in the larger society do they find their own dignity as human beings respected by others. Under these conditions, the minority group child is thrown into a conflict with regard to his feelings about himself and his group. He wonders whether his group and he himself are worthy of no more respect than they receive. This conflict and confusion leads to self-hatred and rejection of his own group.

The report goes on to point out that these children must find ways with which to cope with this conflict. Not every child, of course, reacts with the same patterns of behavior. The particular pattern depends upon many interrelated factors, among which are: the stability and quality of his family relations; the social and economic class to which he belongs; the cultural and educational background of his parents; the particular minority group to which he belongs; his personal characteristics, intelligence, special talents, and personality pattern.

<sup>3</sup>These 32 endorsers were: F. H. Allport, G. W. Allport, Charlotte Babcock, Viola W. Bernard, J. S. Bruner, Hadley Cantril, Mamie B. Clark, Bingham Dai, Allison Davis, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, N. P. Gist, C. S. Johnson, Daniel Katz, Otto Klineberg, David Krech, A. M. Lee, R. N. MacIver, P. F. Lazarsfeld, R. K. Merton, Gardner Murphy, T. M. Newcomb, Robert Redfield, I. D. Reid, A. M. Rose, Gerhart Saenger, R. N. Sanford, S. S. Sargent, M. B. Smith, S. A. Stouffer, Wellman Warner, Goodwin Watson, R. M. Williams.

Some children, usually of the lower socio-economic classes, may react by overt aggressions and hostility directed toward their own group or members of the dominant group. Anti-social and delinquent behavior may often be interpreted as reactions to these racial frustrations. These reactions are self-destructive in that the larger society not only punishes those who commit them, but often interprets such aggressive and anti-social behavior as justification for continuing prejudice and segregation.

Middle class and upper class minority group children are likely to react to their racial frustrations and conflicts by withdrawal and submissive behavior. Or, they may react with compensatory and rigid conformity to the prevailing middle class values and standards and an aggressive determination to succeed in these terms in spite of the handicap of their minority status.

The report indicates that minority group children of all social and economic classes often react with a generally defeatist attitude and a lowering of personal ambitions. This, for example, is reflected in a lowering of pupil morale and a depression of the educational aspiration level among minority group children in segregated schools. In producing such effects, segregated schools impair the ability of the child to profit from the educational opportunities provided him.

Many minority group children of all classes also tend to be hypersensitive and anxious about their relations with the larger society. They tend to see hostility and rejection even in those areas where these might not actually exist.

The report concludes that while the range of individual differences among members of a rejected minority group is as wide as among other peoples, the evidence suggests that all of these children are unnecessarily encumbered in some ways by segregation and its concomitants.

With reference to the impact of segregation and its concomitants on children of the majority group, the report indicates that the effects are somewhat more obscure. Those children who learn the prejudices of our society are also being taught to gain personal status in an unrealistic and non-adaptive way. When comparing themselves to members of the minority group, they are not required to evaluate themselves in terms of the more basic standards of actual personal ability and achievement. The culture permits and at times, encourages them to direct their feelings of hostility and aggression against whole groups of people the members of which are perceived as weaker than themselves. They often develop patterns of guilt feelings, rationalizations and other mechanisms which they must use in an attempt to protect themselves from recognizing the essential injustice of their unrealistic fears and hatreds of minority groups.

The report indicates further that confusion, conflict, moral cynicism, and disrespect for authority may arise in majority group children as a consequence of being taught the moral, religious and democratic principles of the brotherhood of man and the importance of justice and fair play by the same persons and institutions who, in their support of racial segregation and related practices, seem to be acting in a prejudiced and discriminatory manner. Some individuals may attempt to resolve this conflict by intensifying their hostility toward the minority group. Others may react by guilt feelings which are not necessarily reflected in more humane attitudes toward the minority group. Still others react by developing an unwholesome, rigid, and uncritical idealization of all authority figures—their parents, strong political and economic leaders. As

described in *The Authoritarian Personality* (3), they despise the weak, while they obsequiously and unquestioningly conform to the demands of the strong whom they also, paradoxically, subconsciously hate.

With respect to the setting in which these difficulties develop, the report emphasized the role of the home, the school, and other social institutions. Studies have shown that from the earliest school years children are not only aware of the status differences among different groups in the society but begin to react with the patterns described above (4, pp. 168-171).

The impact of Adlerian thought in this historic quest for racial justice and equality can best be indicated by citing the words of the unanimous decision of the United States Supreme Court which ruled that all laws which required or permitted racial segregation in public education violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution. In the historic *Brown* decision of May 17, 1954, reached in the Kansas case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, in which the plaintiffs were Negro children of elementary school age residing in Topeka, the Supreme Court stated:

To separate them [meaning the Negro children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. The effect of this separation on their educational opportunities was well stated by a finding in the Kansas case by a court which nevertheless felt compelled to rule against the Negro plaintiffs:

"Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of the law, therefore, has a tendency to retard the educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system."

Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this finding is amply supported by modern authority.<sup>4</sup> Any language in *Plessy v. Ferguson* contrary to this finding is rejected (14, p. 159).

I do not believe that it is an unpardonable exaggeration to assert that this finding reflects a major contribution of Alfred Adler to man's endless struggle for justice and dignity.

The permeating influence of Adler on the thoughts of American social scientists and social psychologists was to be found throughout

<sup>4</sup>Footnote 11 which is appended in the original at this point lists seven social science documents, beginning with K. B. Clark, *Effect of Prejudice and Discrimination on Personality Development* (5).—Ed. note.

many of the studies which I reviewed and included in the report which was cited by the United States Supreme Court in the Brown decision. The work of the group of social psychologists at the University of California on *The Authoritarian Personality* (3) owes much of the theoretical basis for its empirical findings to the ideas of Adler.

#### TOWARD A RELEVANT SOCIAL SCIENCE

My own recent concerns with the problems of social power and social change bear the direct stamp of Adlerian psychodynamic theory. As I have stated:

Adler's insistence upon the universality of various forms of compensation and "styles of life" which dominate the struggle for a tolerable sense of worth and dignity, may be seen as the intra- and interpersonal level of social power. The implications of Adlerian theory for understanding personality development could provide the bridge for understanding and testing the relationship between a personal and familial level of power struggle on the one hand and the social and intergroup level of power conflict and accommodation on the other.

But such a leap poses a real risk of psychological oversimplification of complex social problems. It is all too easy to assume that one understands social conflict through understanding the child's struggles to achieve a sense of worth in his conflict with punitive or overindulgent parents who equally constrict his ability to develop. Adult compensatory, self-protective, evasive and escapist behavior *may* be so explained. But despite the evidence from such studies as *The Authoritarian Personality*, and the immense amount of evidence and speculation from clinical experience, such explanations have not yet been verified. The promise of a unification of clinical and social psychology inherent in Adler's social dynamic theory and its influence on theorists and practitioners such as Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan and Erich Fromm, can be fulfilled only with further research. So, too, must future research make more precise the relationship between Adler's insight of the struggle for power and the organismic motivational theory of Kurt Goldstein, who succeeded in incorporating the concepts of a neurophysiological psychology into a psychodynamic theoretical system of striving for self-fulfillment (7, pp. 13-14).

Adler's contribution to the present status of the American civil rights movement can be understood not only in terms of the relevance of his theories to the problems of racial justice, not only in terms of his influence on a group of social psychologists who have been in the forefront of the struggle for justice in America, but must also be understood in terms of the fact that Adler as a social analyst and social critic dared to assert and insist that social values and the quest for social morality were legitimate and inescapable ingredients

of a relevant social science. Adler the man and the social philosopher insisted upon viewing man not only in terms of his predicament, but also in terms of his potential.

Adler's emphasis upon the potential social sensitivity and empathy in man provided the important motivational base for an affirmative social technology. The contemporary social science, concerned with problems of social action and social change, cannot afford to be encumbered with fatalistic or misanthropic psychodynamic theories. Adlerian theory aside from the empirical base and in addition to the stimulation which it offers for future research and action, also offers that hope which is essential if man is to continue to seek ways of using his intelligence to assure human survival and progress. Adler provides the contemporary challenge to concerned social psychologists in insisting:

The honest psychologist cannot shut his eyes to social conditions which prevent the child from becoming a part of the community and from feeling at home in the world, and which allow him to grow up as though he lived in enemy country. Thus the psychologist must work against nationalism when it is so poorly understood that it harms mankind as a whole; against wars of conquest, revenge, and prestige; against unemployment which plunges peoples into hopelessness; and against all other obstacles which interfere with the spreading of social interest in the family, the school, and society at large.

We should be concerned to create and foster those environmental influences which make it difficult for a child to get a mistaken notion of the meaning of life and to form a faulty style of life . . . Hence, anyone who hopes to put a stop to misdirected social movements must be able to prove cogently that the feeling of insignificance of the group can be securely relieved only by some other and better means, one which is more in tune with the spirit and the idea of the community of mankind (2, p. 454).

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<sup>5</sup>This paper was Professor Clark's address to the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues upon receiving the Society's Kurt Lewin Memorial Award, 1965.—Ed. note.