Adler, Alfred (1871–1937) from The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science

Adler, Alfred founded the school of Individual Psychology, a theory of personality and psychopathology, as well as a method of psychotherapy. Based on the concepts of the unit, goal striving, and active participation of the individual, it is a humanistic view of psychology rather than a mechanistic drive psychology. It stresses cognitive rather than unconscious processes. Adler accepted being called “father of the inferiority complex.”

Adler graduated from Vienna Medical School in 1895 and became a general practitioner. He soon wrote articles on public health issues, in line with his early interest in the social democratic movement. In 1902, he and three others were invited by Freud for weekly discussions of problems of neurosis. From these meetings the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society developed; Adler became its president in 1910.

In 1911, Adler resigned from the society to form the Society for Free Psychoanalytic Research, soon afterward renamed the Society for Individual Psychology. He objected primarily to what became known as Freud’s metapsychology, then essentially limited to mechanistic concepts of libido and repression. Adler sought a conception of neurosis “only in psychological terms, or terms of cultural psychology.” In this quest he published in 1907 his Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Physical Compensation, broadening the biological foundation from sex to the entire organism. In 1908, he wrote a paper on the aggression drive, which he identified as a drive to prevail, thus replacing sex as the primary drive. Then in 1910 he wrote a paper identifying a feeling of inferiority and masculine protest as overcompensation and replaced the concept of drive altogether with one value. Masculine protest, in its original sense, was shortly afterward replaced by a striving power aimed at gaining superiority. Adler saw the individual in its unity and goal orientation operating as if according to a self-created plan, later called lifestyle. Drives, feelings, emotions, memory, and the unconscious are all processes that are subordinated to the lifestyle.

In 1912, Adler presented his new psychology in The Neurotic Constitution. It contained most of his main concepts, except that of social interest. This last concept, in 1918, became, along with striving for overcoming inferiority feelings, Adler’s most important concept—the criterion for mental health. In cases of psychopathology, which Adler called failures in life, the aptitude for social interest is not adequately developed. Such persons are striving on the socially useless side for personal power over others, versus the healthy, socially useful striving for overcoming general difficulties. The psychotherapist raises the patient’s self-esteem through encouragement, demonstrates the patient’s mistakes to the patient, and strengthens his or her social interest. Thus, the therapist works for a cognitive reorganization and more socially useful behavior. In particular, early recollections and birth-order position, as well as dreams, are used to give the patient an understanding of his or her lifestyle.

During the 1920s Adler became largely interested in prevention. This included child-guidance training of teachers at the Vienna Pedagogical Institute where Adler had his first academic appointment, the establishment of numerous child-guidance centers in public schools, and adult education courses that resulted in his popular book, Understanding Human Nature. From 1926 on, Adler visited the United

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States regularly, lecturing to a wide range of audiences. He was a successful speaker, attracting up to 2000 listeners per lecture. In 1932, he became a professor of medical psychology at Long Island Medical College and in 1934, he settled permanently in New York City.

In the personal realm he married Raissa Timofejevna Epstein, a radical student from a highly privileged Jewish family in Moscow. During the course of their marriage, she worked with Adler at several different times. They had four children, three girls and a boy, of whom the second child, Alexandra, and the third, Kurt, became Adlerian psychiatrists. Alfred Adler died of a heart attack on May 28, 1937, in Aberdeen, Scotland.

Regarding Adler's work there is a paradox: His concepts have been generally validated and have entered most personality theories, including psychoanalysis in particular, yet this has remained largely unrecognized. However, Adlerian tradition is being continued by the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology, which publishes both a newsletter and the quarterly *Individual Psychology*, and holds regular meetings and sponsors workshops. There are Adlerian training institutes as well as scores of local organizations, family education centers, and study groups, for which the groundwork was done chiefly by Rudolf Dreikurs (1897–1972). Abroad, Adlerian societies exist in numerous countries, the largest being in West Germany, which publishes the quarterly *Zeitschrift fur Individualpsychologie*. An International Association for Individual Psychology holds congresses every three years. Affiliated with it is the International Committee for Adlerian Summer Schools and Institutes, which constructs a yearly two-week institute in various countries.

**See also**

Confidentiality and Legal Privilege; Forensic Psychology.

**References**

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