ALFRED ADLER REVISITED

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An Introduction to Alfred Adler

MICHAEL P. MANIACCI

Alfred Adler (1870–1937) was a physician, psychiatrist, author, professor, and husband and father who lived at a significant time in our era. We were about to experience two world wars, the dawning of the nuclear age, social and political upheaval, and revolution. Medicine in specific, and science in general, was ascending, as people began to move more toward scientific and away from traditional folk and religious explanations for the assorted troubles that were emerging. People were feeling lost, if not scared and anxious, about themselves, their children, and their worlds. The physician was becoming the source of hope, if not faith and salvation, for what disturbed us. It was into this context that three men stepped up to declare they had the answers to what was wrong: Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Alfred Adler.

This book is intended to explore one of those men’s answers, Alfred Adler. Those were heady times. People listened, and read, and studied, and practiced. Perhaps, just perhaps, if we learned from these men and others like them, we could feel better, do better, and act better. Maybe, just maybe, we could change things—and be better.

Like Plato and Aristotle, Freud, Jung, and Adler have become common knowledge to today’s world. Most of Western civilization knows their names, something about their theories, terms, and ideas. Even though the average person may not know any particulars, words and concepts like drives, unconscious, inferiority complex, lifestyle, psyche, ego, introvert, extrovert, and the significance of dreams and the early childhood years have become commonplace. In particular, Adler wrote 13 books, authored dozens and dozens of articles, gave hundreds of lectures, and taught classes for both professionals and interested laypersons. He was interviewed all over the world and treated like a celebrity, with his life and work discussed, processed, debated, and challenged. Like his onetime associates, Adler thought he had answers, and he felt almost compelled to share them with the world, for the world’s sake. Twice in his lifetime, he saw his country
devastated by war, political upheaval, and social unrest. He and his family had to flee their country for their lives, and he lost one of his children to the political revolution the world was experiencing because she was on the front line, trying to intervene. This last pain was almost more than he could bear and shortly after he found out about it, he was struck with a near fatal illness that most likely took his life several brief months later.

This book is intended to bring some of his original writings back to life. To these original writings, contemporary experts have been asked to comment and introduce Adler’s work through the prism of the 21st century. Repeatedly, they note how contemporary his ideas seem, and how prescient he seemed to be. A possible reason for this will be explored below. Perhaps readers of this work will agree, and the debating, discussing, and challenging can continue.

**ALFRED ADLER: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Ansbacher (1978), Ellenberger (1970), Furthmuller (1964), Hoffman (1994), Manaster, Painter, Deutsch, and Overholt (1977), Mosak and Maniacci (1999), and Orgler (1939/1963) provide the details highlighted in this and the previous section. Adler was the second of six children. He woke one morning to find one of his brothers dead in the bed next to him. Twice in his life, he was run over in the street outside his home. Once, he contracted a pneumonia that almost killed him. In fact, he heard the physician tell his father, “Your boy is lost” (Orgler, 1939/1963, p. 16). He suffered from poor eyesight, and his family was told he should be apprenticed to a shoemaker because his studies were so bad. With glasses, his academics improved so much he became one of the best students.

Adler learned the importance of health, how crucial the support of family was, and the necessity of constructively compensating for illness or weakness. He went to medical school, studied to be a clinician (as opposed to a researcher, like Freud), and specialized in ophthalmology. He quickly expanded to general practice, and eventually, psychiatry. He met and married a brilliant woman, Riassa Timofeyewna Epstein, a scholar who was multilingual and politically active. He set up practice in the lower- to middle-class part of town and treated the circus sideshow performers on a regular basis. He was struck by their ability to compensate, and overcompensate, for their deformities and still meet the tasks of life: work, friendship, and love.

Partially under the influence of his wife, Adler was very politically active, attending meetings, writing pamphlets, and marching in various rallies, including for women’s liberation. It was around this time, when he was beginning his practice, starting his family, and establishing himself in the community, that he met Freud.
ADLER AND FREUD: COWORKERS AND RIVALS

Adler was 14 years Freud’s junior. Freud was much better established in the community. He had been practicing longer, had published more and lectured to professionals longer, and had done extensive research in neurology, particularly aphasia. He was a professor at the country’s prestigious medical school. They were both working professionals and colleagues, and while Adler deferred to Freud in many ways, as would have been expected given the differences in their ages and professional experience, Adler was not a disciple. Within a short time, Adler and Freud (and three others) started the Wednesday Night Meetings, soon to become the first psychoanalytic society, and invited others to join. Adler, not Freud, was the first president of the society, and coeditor (with Freud) of the journal they started. Over the years, they began to differ on several points, and soon, it came to a head over two issues: repression and the masculine protest.

Freud felt that repression was a product of living in a society, a community, and a consequence of having to adapt to communal life. If people did not repress their drives, they would kill each other, assault each other, and tear society apart. Only by repressing these drives could people live together. Adler disagreed. He felt that only poorly adjusted individuals had to repress their drives. If they were well integrated into the society, at peace with themselves and others, individuals could live in harmony and satisfy their drives with others, in cooperative ways. Freud felt this was naive, even foolish, and stated that Adler was grossly underestimating the true depth of pathology that rested inside people. He called Adler superficial, a label that would haunt him his entire professional life, and well after his death. Adler stated that Freud was not describing normal individuals but childlike people who were poorly socialized and overindulged, and that people who were raised well and with love and compassion could achieve what Adler was advocating, and they did it every day, in many communities. Adler called Freud’s views the psychology of pampered children who would not accept no for an answer, who were self-serving and self-centered. They did not take into consideration the welfare of others. They may have had good reasons for developing such attitudes, including poor social conditions and possibly inferior organs, but no such reasons were acceptable for maintaining such a stance.

Similarly, Freud felt that women were constitutionally and biologically inferior. Because they were born without a penis, they could not experience the Oedipal conflict the way men did, they would not fear castration, and therefore, they would not develop a superego, a sense of morality and conscience. Adler forcefully disagreed, but he attempted to remain diplomatic. Yes, women may have difficulties in greater numbers than men (and therefore be utilizing more psychoanalytic services), but this was because of the social situation in which they found themselves. Women were treated as second-class citizens and told from an early age that men were more powerful, and they were not given the same
choices and freedoms men had. They therefore exhibited what Adler termed the masculine protest: They were attesting to the fact that they were as powerful as men, but in many instances, in socially useless ways, such as through psychological symptoms. It was only through their symptoms that they could gain power, recognition, and some sense of control in their lives and families. If women were given the rights and privileges of men, not only would they be better, so would society. Freud was unmovable.

A vote was taken, and Freud and his growing followers felt that Adler and those who thought as he did were wrong. They were no longer welcome in the new psychoanalytic movement. Adler and his followers tried to negotiate, but to no avail. Adler left and started his own group, originally called the Society for Free Psychoanalytic Research. Apparently, the free meant free from Freud. Many early members tried to keep membership in both groups, but Freud would have none of it. He declared that membership in one precluded membership in the other. Members would have to choose. Eleven members resigned from Freud’s group and joined Adler. A bright, young Swiss psychiatrist was recruited to replace Adler. His name was Carl Jung. He became the new head of the society and within just a few years, he too was voted out, by Freud and his loyal followers who felt that he too, as Adler before him, had deviated too far from psychoanalytic doctrine and that his new concepts were not compatible with Freud’s.

**ADLER: THE MOVEMENT TOWARD INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY**

As stated above, Adler wanted to originally call his group the Society for Free Psychoanalytic Research, but Freud objected to Adler using the term psychoanalytic, so Adler began exploring for new titles. He considered Personality Psychology, but that was already being used. He then wanted Holistic Psychology, but that too was being used by a new and up-and-coming group that would become known as the Gestalt Psychologists (Gestalt, in German, meaning whole). He chose Individual Psychology, meaning individuum, a Latin term for indivisible. The proper English translation should have been Indivisible Psychology, but as will be noted below, poor translation would become a curse to Adler and his writings to the present day.

Adler and his followers began meeting. Adler (1907/1917) had written one book as a member of the Freudian group, Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Psychical Compensation: A Contribution to Clinical Medicine. It was well received and even praised by Freud. Now, on his own, he needed a declaration of independence, and he had been preparing one for months even while still in the Freudian circle. He would rush its completion and submit it to the medical school where Freud taught so he could gain an appointment and train other physicians and thus grow his movement. It was his most important work, and Adler (1912/2002) called it, The Neurotic Character: Fundamentals of Individual Psychology and Psychotherapy.
He was still rather polite to Freud, giving his senior colleague credit and playing down any bad feelings toward him. Nonetheless, he outlined in exquisite detail his differences from mainstream psychoanalysis and pointed toward a new direction not just for psychiatry but for medical practice as well. It was two and a half years before Adler would receive a response. He was unanimously rejected by 25 professors. Freud had been teaching there for 15 years already. The rejection was unequivocal, yet unclear. In part, it may have been Adler’s radical political leanings that damned him. His once close association with Freud did not help either—Freud was not popular among the academics at the medical school because of his “speculations.” In fact, Freud had not submitted any psychoanalytic works as a basis for his appointment: He submitted his research on aphasia. After he was appointed, he began teaching psychoanalysis. This did not please the faculty, but it was tolerated well enough to keep Freud on a limited basis. Adler was reportedly devastated. He would never teach in his home country, nor did he ever apply again. As will become detailed below, he would never write a book again.

ADLER AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

For the rest of his life, Adler would continue to write articles, but his books would be “assembled” for him from two sources. Either his articles would be gathered together and anthologized, or his lectures to lay audiences would be hastily put together from his notes and transcriptions and published as “books.” He came to America and received academic appointments to universities, but almost always in departments of education, social work, or medical psychology. The Freudians had a stranglehold in the medical schools in America, and the psychology departments were dominated by a young psychologist named John Watson, with his new system he labeled behaviorism. The behaviorists had no tolerance for the Freudian speculators, and the Freudians had little patience for the naïve behaviorists; hence, the (almost) tragic split began in the 1920s between the medical schools and psychology departments of the major universities. Adler found himself welcomed in neither; he was not psychoanalytic enough for the Freudians, and the behaviorists considered him just another Freudian. He came up with an idea. He would turn to the people themselves, and he began teaching and writing for them, directly.

Adler opened clinics for the poor. He taught teachers and set up offices in the public schools, training teachers, counselors, and social workers in his methods. He lectured to whoever would listen, at churches, public meeting halls, community organizations, and the community mental health clinics he was instrumental in establishing. He provided consultations to prisons, sanitariums, mental institutions for the “insane,” and magazines and newspapers. His popular self-help “books” became global best-sellers, much to the annoyance of Freud, whose
books did not sell well, especially in America. He became a media sensation and one of the most famous people in the world.

**ADLER AS WRITER**

Adler wrote in German. Later in life, he wrote in English, but how much he actually “wrote,” versus was written for him, remains speculation. He did lecture in English, but while he was reportedly a dynamic and captivating speaker, his English retained much of the Germanic structure from his native tongue. Adler turned over the editing of his works to translators, editors, and colleagues as he became increasingly busy. His global reach was unprecedented, and as he grew increasingly busy, he did not closely attend to their work. Frankly, some of his early translations were simply wrong. As noted earlier, Adler did not intend (primarily) the word *individual* to mean “unique person”; he meant “indivisible.” When he used words like *lacking courage*, he was not sympathetically translated—the more accurate translation is “discouraged.” Similarly, though the term *pampered* became synonymous with Adler, the more accurate translation is “tenderized.” In many of his early works, he appeared to have used the word *soul*; the more accurate translation of the same term from German is “mind.” When he apparently used the term *failure*, an alternate translation is “to breakdown” or “refuse.” The list could continue, but the point is clear. Adler should have checked more closely, but he was both too busy and too avoidant to address writing in great detail ever again, using a safeguarding operation he would later identify as “distance.” His lack of attentiveness hurt his reputation with scholars and unsympathetic students. (For the record, Freud fared little better in certain crucial instances. Freud was poorly translated as well, with words like *id* being an inaccurate translation of “it” and *ego* being a poor choice for “self.”)

To read Adler with such modified translations in mind helps. He was brilliant, but not scholarly. He was busy in private practice, not teaching. He did not have the time or structure of an academician. That was not his goal, and his behavior fell in line with that. He wanted to help as many people as directly as possible, and he did. He was considered a master clinician by those who knew him, but the effect upon his academic reputation was devastating. He is difficult to follow at times, unclear in his points, and apparently lacking in references and citations to other authors or experts (though not in his one scholarly book, *The Neurotic Character*). The articles presented in this text are an attempt to clarify some of this. In most of the articles in this book, Adler was direct, clear, and to the point. Some of the translations are still stilted but, in the interest of historical accuracy, are left in their original form. In the article format, Adler was sharp and often as penetrating as any physician or psychiatrist, and in many instances far more astute than scholars of his or our day. He was attentive!
ADLER AND THE NATURE OF HIS THEORETICAL MODEL

When Freud, Adler, and Jung met, wrote, discussed, and analyzed, they were not modest. They wanted to create a new discipline, even a new science. They were global (at best) and grandiose (at worst) in their aspirations. They wanted to explain everything. They did. How successfully they attained that goal is open to question, but they did try. It is fascinating to compare their writings with contemporaries from our era. The articles written by today’s scholars and professionals are typically much more scientific, far more scholarly, and more tightly focused. Yet, they lack something. Experts in the social sciences today, especially psychiatry and psychology, are generally aiming much lower. They achieve their aims with precision and pedantry, but their global reach is limited, partially due to information overload among the general public, but also because many of them lack the vision—or hubris—to try.

The founding three (Freud, Adler, Jung) wanted to be taken seriously, and respect for a new discipline can be hard won. Freud’s answer was to model his system after the prevailing dominant science of his day: physics. It was, and is, considered to be the grandparent of all science. He began a tradition that continues to this day, that is, of using models from physics to explain the functioning of the mind and brain, thereby giving an apparent sophistication—and prestige—to his theories.

The machine of the day in Freud’s time was the steam engine. Newtonian physics could explain the workings of the world, and any science that was worth its salt had to at least implicitly acknowledge Newton. Freud’s terminology was consistent with this: energy, force, resistance, pressure, blocking. As the technology of the day changed, so too did the metaphor. When the telephone and telegraph arose, psychology and psychiatry began using images of wiring, circuits, and communication theory. The model then became computers, and neural networks, nodes, and complex systems grounded in information processing emerged. Freud’s system, like much in brain science, constantly undergoes revision as the models in physics change. With the new models of chaos theory and fractal mathematics emerging, psychiatry and psychology will scramble yet again to revise their languages, metaphors, and terminologies.

Interestingly, Adler tried this language of Newtonian physics in his first book on organ inferiority in 1907. It did not work for him. Perhaps he too was fascinated by trying to emulate traditional scientific methodology, or he was still swayed by Freud’s views. He never returned to that language or its metaphors again after 1907. Slowly, his language, and thinking, began to change. By 1912, he found three new sources, and a major conceptual shift happened. He found Nietzsche, Vaihinger, and Shakespeare. Their influence upon the way Adler not only phrased his system but conceptualized his theory was enormous. He began a conceptual shift that was more than terminological. Adler began thinking differently. A brief examination of each thinker will clarify.
With Nietzsche (1901/1967), he found a gadfly, a rebel who provoked, challenged, and disrupted practically everything he touched. Adler was drawn to this for many reasons, but one key was that Adler was a second-born who also enjoyed challenging others. Adler’s (favored) older brother was named Sigmund, and Adler saw in Sigmund Freud someone who was an oldest-born authority figure. Nietzsche delighted in questioning, and overthrowing, traditional values, assumptions, and pretenses. Nietzsche developed ideas such as the prime motivating force behind all human functioning as the will to power. He believed that people attempted to distance themselves from responsibilities and that most problems people developed were due to the fact that they were competitive and their unwillingness to acknowledge such competitive striving fostered all sorts of dysfunctions. Unconscious processes led people to make choices for which they were responsible, but unaware. There was an ideal type for which all people strove, and challenging that ideal produced panic, hostility, and dissimulation from people.

Vaihinger (1911/1965) elaborated upon concepts from Immanuel Kant. People formed cognitive assumptions, what he called fictions, and those fictions served as a map of the world. Some of those maps were just that, maps. They were useful expedients to navigate through the world. Some people, however, took those maps too seriously. They confused the map with the terrain and became too rigid.

With Shakespeare, Adler discovered a unique thinker. Though writing in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Shakespeare’s influence seemed unbounded. Especially during his prime writing period (from about 1595 till his retirement in 1611), Shakespeare changed the way people thought about human motivation and the world. He seems to have created the notion of the human as we know it today (Bloom, 1998; Nuttall, 2007). In Shakespeare, people were often victims of life and other people, but something new was added. People also brought their own downfall upon themselves. They had a unique, distinguishable character that was the source of both their strengths and their weakness. The same characteristics that made Hamlet, Othello, or Cleopatra great also brought them down. Their “destinies” were largely self-created, through flaws that could be directly correlated to a mismatch between what they brought to situations and the requirements of the situations themselves. To truly understand human nature, one had to know both the character and the life situation (with its trials and challenges). It was the mismatch between those two forces that led to tragedy, not one or the other.

In The Neurotic Character, Adler often cites Nietzsche, Vaihinger, and Shakespeare. The consequence is more than superficial; yes, other authors and physicians are cited, as is research, but there is a clear difference in his thinking from other things he had written thus far. Adler was not thinking like an aspiring physicist. He was thinking like a philosopher or writer, and he had excellent taste. The insights these three individuals had were profound and not tied to any fashion of the time. Since he was not tying himself to any particular system
in science, as the science changed, Adler did not seem out of step. The insights of Nietzsche and Shakespeare, in particular, have stood the test of time. Both those men are often cited as among the towering geniuses of all time (e.g., Bloom, 2003). By building his thinking, and his system, upon their styles of thinking, Adler seemed to become “timeless” himself.

Adler’s theory has been relatively unchanged since he first articulated it. His assumptions are as valid today as they were back then. Some of the postulates derived from his assumptions have come under criticism, and in cases such as his stance toward “homosexuality” appropriately so, but he was a man of his times. His assumptions, though, are still amazingly relevant. Because his focus was clinically oriented, not academically driven, he developed numerous tactics for achieving change in characters and the situations they find themselves in. While his theory is consistent, his tactics are diverse. Today’s Adlerian practitioners are diverse in their styles of counseling and therapy. Their theory is homogeneous. It appears to have stood the test of time. Freud, however, has not had the same fate. He was much more research and academically oriented. He only would work with patients that fit his system. If they did not, he would refer them out (often to Adler, at least early on it appears). That was not the case with Adler: He would modify his style to suit the needs of the patient.

Freud, till his death, advocated psychoanalysis as a research method. He wanted to be a researcher, but his desire to marry and start a family “got in the way,” so to speak. He found he could not support his growing family on a researcher’s salary, so reluctantly he began a private practice. He wanted to understand human nature, and the best way to do that (he thought) was to study cases in depth. He adopted a researcher’s stance: He would sit away from the subject, not interfere with the process, and take copious notes. He saw patients four to six times per week. Too much interference from the researcher might contaminate the data, so professional distance was required. His original research was on aphasia—the loss of speech. He was fascinated about how and why people lost the ability to speak, to articulate their issues. Psychoanalysis was a method of transferring his academic research on aphasia into clinical practice. He found, as most of us do, only what he was looking for, and his theory closely resembles his biases and personality dynamics (Mosak & Kopp, 1973).

Adler was different. He wanted to overcome death. He wanted individuals to compensate for their weaknesses and unfortunate circumstances of life. He wanted to make life fair and better for all. He was clinically driven. He took any number of individuals, and types of individuals, into his practice. He worked with psychotics, criminals, children, families, couples, teachers, and school systems, as well as traditionally defined neurotics. He even advocated group psychotherapy. He found what he looked for as well, but he had a different outlook on life and himself than Freud (Mosak & Kopp, 1973).
It is within this context that *Alfred Adler Revisited* is presented. Following are some of his most important articles. Their selection was not exhaustive, nor was it comprehensive. They were picked because of their seeming relevance to today’s issues and their importance in Adlerian theory and practice. They are relatively self-explanatory. Their selection will detail the core elements of his theory and some of the tactics he used and advocated for changing both individuals and the systems (e.g., families, schools, communities) in which they found themselves. We hope you enjoy them and look forward to the debate continuing.

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