Chapter 3
Adler: Individual Psychology

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to accomplish the following objectives:
1. Distinguish between striving for superiority and striving for success.
2. Explain how seemingly contradictory behaviors may reflect a single goal of striving for superiority.
3. Describe the role of subjective perceptions in Adler's theory of personality.
4. Discuss Adler's concept of fictionalism.
5. Define causality and teleology, and discuss Adler's teleological approach.
6. Explain organ dialect, and give examples of how it is expressed in a person's behavior.
7. Define social interest, and give examples of what it is and what it is not.
8. Discuss Alder's concept of creative power and be prepared to debate the validity of this concept.
9. List and describe three types of Adlerian safeguarding tendencies.
10. Discuss Adler's ideas on birth order.
11. Discuss research on Adler's hypotheses concerning early recollections.
12. Critique Adler's ideas as a scientific theory.

Lecture Outline

I. Overview of Individual Psychology

Alfred Adler was neither a terrorist nor a person driven mad by ambition. Indeed, his **individual psychology** presents an optimistic view of people while resting heavily on the notion of *social interest,* that is, a feeling of oneness with all humankind. In addition to Adler's more optimistic look at people, several other differences made the relationship between Freud and Adler quite tenuous.
- Freud reduced all motivation to sex and aggression, whereas Adler saw people as being motivated mostly by social influences and by their striving for superiority or success.
- Freud assumed that people have little or no choice in shaping their personality, whereas Adler believed that people are largely responsible for who they are.
- Freud's assumption that present behavior is caused by past experiences was directly opposed to Adler's notion that present behavior is shaped by people's view of the future.
- In contrast to Freud, who placed very heavy emphasis on unconscious components of behavior, Adler believed that psychologically healthy people are usually aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it.

An original member of Freud's psychoanalytic group, Alfred Adler left the group when theoretical and personal differences between Adler and Freud emerged. Adler established an opposing theory, which became known as individual psychology.

II. Biography of Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler was born on February 7, 1870, in Rudolfsheim, Austria, a village near Vienna. He was the second son of a middle-class Jewish parents. As a young child he was weak and sickly, a condition that contrasted sharply with his strong, healthy older brother, Sigmund. Adler developed a strong rivalry with Sigmund—a rivalry that was similar to his later relationship with Freud. Like Freud, Adler was a physician, and in 1902, he became a charter member of the Wednesday Psychological Society, a group of five physicians who met weekly at Freud's home to discuss psychology and neuropathology. This group was known as the Wednesday Psychological Society until 1908, when it became the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. However, personal and professional differences between Freud and Adler led to Adler's departure from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1911. Adler soon founded his own group, the Society for Individual Psychology. During the last few years of his life, Adler lived in the United States and earned a reputation as a gifted public speaker. He died in 1937, while on a lecture tour in Scotland.

III. Introduction to Adlerian Theory

Adler evolved a basically simple and parsimonious theory. To Adler, people are born with weak, inferior bodies—a condition that leads to *feelings* of inferiority and a consequent dependence on other people. More specifically, the main tenets of Adlerian theory can be stated in outline form.
- Striving for success or superiority
- Subjective perceptions
- Unity and self-consistency of personality
- Social interest
- Style of life
- Creative power

IV. Striving for Success or Superiority

The first tenet of Adlerian theory is: *The one dynamic force behind people's behavior is the striving for success or superiority*.

A. The Final Goal

The final goal of success or superiority toward which all people strive unifies personality and renders all behavior comprehensible. In striving for their final goal, people create and pursue many preliminary goals. These subgoals are often conscious, but the connection between them and the final goal usually remains unknown. Furthermore, the relationship among preliminary

goals is seldom realized.

B. The Striving Force as Compensation

People strive for superiority or success as a means of compensation for feelings of inferiority or weakness. Adler (1930) believed that all humans are "blessed" at birth with small, weak, and inferior bodies. These physical deficiencies ignite feelings of inferiority only because people, by their nature, possess an innate tendency toward completion or wholeness. As a creation of the individual, the goal may take any form. In his final theory, Adler identified two general avenues of striving.

- The first is the socially nonproductive attempt to gain personal superiority.
- The second involves social interest and is aimed at success or perfection for everyone.

C. Striving for Personal Superiority

Some people strive for superiority with little or no concern for others. Their goals are personal ones, and their strivings are motivated largely by exaggerated feelings of personal inferiority, or by the presence of an inferiority complex. Murderers, thieves, and con artists are obvious examples of people who strive for personal gain.

D. Striving for Success

In contrast to people who strive for personal gain are those psychologically healthy people who are motivated by social interest and the success of all humankind. These healthy individuals are concerned with goals beyond themselves, are capable of helping others without demanding or expecting a personal payoff, and are able to see others not as opponents but as people with whom they can cooperate for social benefit. Their own success is not gained at the expense of others but is a natural tendency to move toward completion or perfection.

V. Subjective Perceptions

Adler's second tenet is: *People's subjective perceptions shape their behavior and personality*. People strive for superiority or success to compensate for feelings of inferiority, but the manner in which they strive is not shaped by reality but by their subjective perceptions of reality, that is, by their **fictions**, or expectations of the future.

A. Fictionalism

The most important fiction in one's life is the goal of superiority or success, a goal people created early in their life and may not clearly understand. Adler held that fictions guide behavior, because people act *as if* these fictions are true. Adler emphasized teleology over causality; that is, he favored explanations of behavior in terms of future goals rather than past causes.

B. Physical Inferiorities

Adler believed that the whole human race is "blessed" with organ inferiorities. These physical handicaps have little or no importance by themselves but become meaningful when they stimulate subjective feelings of inferiority, which serve as an impetus toward perfection or completion.

VI. Unity and Self-Consistency of Personality

The third tenet of Adlerian theory is: *Personality is unified and self-consistent.* Individual psychology insists on the fundamental unity of personality and the notion that inconsistent behavior does not exist. Thoughts, feelings, and actions are all directed toward a single goal and serve a single purpose.

A. Organ Dialect

According to Adler (1956), the whole person strives in a self-consistent fashion toward a single goal, and all separate actions and functions can be understood only as parts of this goal. The disturbance of one part of the body cannot be viewed in isolation; it affects the entire person. In fact, the deficient organ expresses the direction of the individual's goal, a condition known as **organ dialect.**

B. Conscious and Unconscious

Adler (1956) defined the unconscious as that part of the goal that is neither clearly formulated nor completely understood by an individual. With this definition, Adler avoided a dichotomy between the unconscious and the conscious, which he saw as two cooperating parts of the same unified system. Conscious thoughts are those that are understood and regarded by the individual as helpful in striving for success, whereas unconscious thoughts are those that are not helpful.

VII. Social Interest

The fourth of Adler's tenets is: *The value of all human activity must be seen from the viewpoint of social interest.* **Social interest** is Adler's somewhat misleading translation of his original German term, *Gemeinschaftsgefühl.* A person with well-developed *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* strives not for personal superiority but for perfection for all people in an ideal community. Social interest can be defined as an attitude of relatedness with humanity in general as well as an empathy for each member of the human community. It manifests itself as cooperation with others for social advancement rather than for personal gain (Adler, 1964).

A. Origins of Social Interest

Social interest is rooted as potentiality in everyone, but it must be developed before it can contribute to a useful style of life. Adler (1956) believed that the effects of the early social

environment are extremely important. The relationship a child has with the mother and the father is so powerful that it smothers the effects of heredity.

B. Importance of Social Interest

Social interest was Adler's yardstick for measuring psychological health and is thus "the sole criterion of human values" (Adler, 1927, p. 167). To Adler, social interest is the only gauge to be used in judging the worth of a person. As the barometer of normality, it is the standard to be used in determining the usefulness of a life.

VIII. Style of Life

Adler's fifth tenet is: The self-consistent personality structure develops into a person's style of life. **Style of life** is the term Adler used to refer to the flavor of a person's life. It includes a person's goal, self-concept, feelings for others, and attitude toward the world. It is the product of the interaction of heredity, environment, and a person's creative power. A person's style of life is fairly well established by age 4 or 5. Psychologically unhealthy individuals often lead rather inflexible lives that are marked by an inability to choose new ways of reacting to their environment. In contrast, psychologically healthy people behave in diverse and flexible ways with styles of life that are complex, enriched, and changing.

IX. Creative Power

Each person, Adler believed, is empowered with the freedom to create her or his own style of life. Ultimately, all people are responsible for who they are and how they behave. Their **creative power** places them in control of their own lives, is responsible for their final goal, determines their method of striving for that goal, and contributes to the development of social interest. In short, creative power makes each person a free individual.

X. Abnormal Development

The creative power endows humans, within certain limits, with the freedom to be either psychologically healthy or unhealthy and to follow either a useful or useless style of life.

A. General Description

According to Adler (1956), the one factor underlying all types of maladjustments is underdeveloped social interest. Besides lacking social interest, neurotics tend to (1) set their goals too high, (2) live in their own private world, and (3) have a rigid and dogmatic style of life.

B. External Factors in Maladjustment

Adler (1964) recognized three contributing factors, any one of which is sufficient to contribute

to abnormality: (1) exaggerated physical deficiencies, (2) a pampered style of life, and (3) a neglected style of life. Exaggerated physical deficiencies, whether congenital or the result of injury or disease, are not sufficient to lead to maladjustment. They must be accompanied by accentuated feelings of inferiority. A pampered style of life lies at the heart of most neuroses. Pampered people have weak social interest but a strong desire to perpetuate the pampered, parasitic relationship they originally had with one or both of their parents. Abused and mistreated children develop little social interest and tend to create a neglected style of life. They have little confidence in themselves and tend to overestimate difficulties connected with life's major problems. They are distrustful of other people and are unable to cooperate for the common welfare.

C. Safeguarding Tendencies

Adler believed that people create patterns of behavior to protect their exaggerated sense of self-esteem against public disgrace. These protective devices, called **safeguarding tendencies**, enable people to hide their inflated self-image and to maintain their current style of life. The most common of the safeguarding tendencies are **excuses**, which are typically expressed in the "Yes, but" or "If only" format. Excuses protect a weak—but artificially inflated—sense of self-worth and deceive people into believing that they are more superior than they really are (Adler, 1956). Another common safeguarding tendency is **aggression**. Adler (1956) held that some people use aggression to safeguard their exaggerated superiority complex, that is, to protect their fragile self-esteem. Safeguarding through aggression may take one of the following form:

- **Depreciation**: The tendency to undervalue other people's achievements and to overvalue one's own.
- **Accusation**: The tendency to blame others for one's failures and to seek revenge, thereby safeguarding one's own tenuous self-esteem
- **Self-accusation**: It is marked by self-torture and guilt.

Personality development can be halted when people run away from difficulties. Adler referred to this tendency as **withdrawal** or safeguarding through distance. Some people unconsciously escape life's problems by setting up a distance between themselves and those problems. Adler (1956) recognized four modes of safeguarding through withdrawal:

- **Moving backward**
- **Standing still**
- **Hesitating,**
- **Constructing obstacles**

D. Masculine Protest

According to Adler, cultural and social practices—not anatomy—influence many men and women to overemphasize the importance of being manly, a condition he called the **masculine protest**. The epitome of success for boys is to win, to be powerful, and to be on top. In contrast, girls often learn to be passive and to accept an inferior position in society. In contrast to Freud's

views on women, Adler assumed that women—because they have the same physiological and psychological needs as men—want more or less the same things that men want.

XI. Applications of Individual Psychology

The practical applications of individual psychology can be divided into the following four areas:
- Family constellation (birth order)
- Early recollections
- Dreams
- Psychotherapy

A. Family Constellation

Although people's perception of the situation into which they were born is more important than numerical rank, Adler did form some general hypotheses about birth order. He claimed that firstborn children are likely to have intensified feelings of power and superiority, high anxiety, and overprotective tendencies. Secondborn children (like Adler himself) begin life in a better situation for developing cooperation and social interest. To some extent, the personalities of secondborn children are shaped by their perception of the older child's attitude toward them. Youngest children, Adler believed, are often the most pampered and, consequently, run a high risk of being problem children. They are often highly motivated to exceed older siblings and to become the fastest runner, the best musician, the most skilled athlete, or the most ambitious student. Only children are in a unique position of competing, not against brothers and sisters, but against father and mother.

B. Early Recollections

A more reliable method of determining style of life is to ask people for their **early recollections** (ERs). Adler believed that ERs are not chance memories but templates on which people project their current style of life. ERs need not be accurate accounts of early events; they have psychological importance because they reflect one's current view of the world.

C. Dreams

Adler believed that dreams can provide clues to solving future problems. However, dreams are disguised to deceive the dreamer and usually require interpretation by another person.

D. Psychotherapy

The chief purpose of Adlerian psychotherapy is to enhance courage, lessen feelings of inferiority, and encourage social interest. Through the use of humor and warmth, Adler tried to increase the patient's courage, self-esteem, and social interest. He believed that a warm, nurturing attitude by the therapist encourages patients to expand their social interest to each of the three problems of life: sexual love, friendship, and occupation.

XII. Related Research

Adlerian theory continues to generate a moderate amount of research. For example, some researchers have recently argued that using social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter serves the purpose of increasing *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* (Bluvshtein, Kruzic, & Massaglia, 2015). The most widely researched topics in Adler's theory, however, have been birth order, early recollections, and striving for superiority.

A. Birth Order, Intelligence, Academic Achievement, and Personality

Adler's fascinating theory on birth order has led to an almost overwhelming amount of research. In 1996, Frank Sulloway published *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives,* in which he presented an evolutionary argument for birth order effects on personality. Lending support to Adler's theory, Sulloway proposed that firstborns are likely to be achievement-oriented, anxious, and conformist whereas laterborns tend to be more adventurous, open to experience, innovative, and rejecting of the status quo.

In a very recent review of over 200 birth-order studies that did show significant differences between siblings, Eckstein and colleagues (2010) found support for Adler and Sulloway: firstborns and only children are seen as the most high-achieving and laterborns as the most rebellious and socially interested. Important to note in Adler's theory of birth order effects is that he hypothesized that it is the family *constellation*, not something biological or prenatal, that results in different personalities among siblings.

B. Early Recollections and Career Choice

Adler believed that career choices reflect a person's personality. In order to test this hypothesis, Jon Kasler and Ofra Nevo (2005) gathered earliest memories from 130 participants. These recollections were then coded by two judges on the kind of career the memory reflected. The recollections were classified using Holland's (1973) vocational interest types, namely Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional.

Kasler and Nevo (2005) found that early recollections in childhood did match career type as an adult, at least for the three career types that were well represented in their sample (Realistic, Artistic, and Social). The general direction of a participant's career path could be identified from themes seen in early recollections. These vignettes are consistent with Alder's view of early recollections and demonstrate how style of life may relate to occupational choice.

C. Distinguishing Narcissism as Striving for Superiority Versus Self-Esteem as Striving for Success

Adler has been credited with making an important contribution to one's understanding of narcissism (Ansbacher, 1985). The historical record shows that Adler's idea of the "masculine protest" significantly influenced Freud's theorizing regarding narcissism. Furthermore, Adler's personality theory provided a foundation for one's modern understanding that a narcissist is someone who lacks social interest. For a narcissist, and for someone whom Adler believed is driven by a striving for personal superiority, others' welfare is of little to no concern. Such a person's striving is centered around being acknowledged as *better than* everyone else, to be "the best."

Brummelman, Thomaes, and Sedikides (2016) recently provided a theoretical analysis of the distinction between narcissism and self-esteem that maps quite nicely onto Adler's perspective. For these psychologists, narcissism, a maladaptive and unhealthy personality orientation, differs dramatically from self-esteem, an adaptive and healthy approach to the self. They argue that both narcissism and self-esteem have their origins in children's internalization of regard from their caregivers. However, this regard is characterized differently when it underlies narcissism rather than self-esteem. That is, parental overvaluation leads to a core belief that "I am superior to others." In contrast, parental warmth leads to a core belief that "I am worthy." These two different core beliefs about the self are not equally resilient. As the authors write, "Although everyone can be worthy, not everyone can be superior" (Brummelman et al., 2016, p. 10).

XIII. Critique of Adler

Adler's theory, like that of Freud, produced many concepts that do not easily lend themselves to either verification or falsification. One of Adler's most important concepts—the assumption that present style of life determines early memories rather than vice versa—is difficult to either verify or falsify. Another function of a useful theory is to *generate research*, and on this criterion Adler's theory can be rated above average. Adler's practical view of life's problems allows one to rate his theory high on its ability to make sense out of what people know about human behavior. Also, Adlerian theory high can be rated high on its ability to *guide action*. On the criterion of *parsimony*, the theory cane be rated about average. Because the theory lacks *operational definitions*, it rates low on *internal consistency*.

XIV. Concept of Humanity

Adler believed that people are basically self-determined and that they shape their personalities from the meaning they give to their experiences. Heredity endows people with certain abilities, and environment gives them some opportunity to enhance those abilities, but people are ultimately responsible for the use they make of these abilities. Thus, Adler's theory rates high on free-choice, social influences, and uniqueness; very high on optimism and teleology; and average on unconscious influences.