

## ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

### 8. INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

#### 8.1. Theory Background

Individual psychology is a term used specifically to refer to the psychological method or science founded by the Viennese psychiatrist Alfred Adler. According to individual psychology the main motives of human thought and behavior are individual man's striving for superiority and power, partly in compensation for his feeling of inferiority. Every individual, in this view, is unique, and his personality structure including his unique goal and ways of striving for it finds expression in his style of life, this life-style being the product of his own creativity. Nevertheless, the individual cannot be considered apart from society; all important problems, including problems of general human relations, occupation, and love, are social.

This theory led to explanations of psychological normality and abnormality: although the normal person with a well-developed social interest will compensate by striving on the useful side of life (that is, by contributing to the common welfare and thus helping to overcome common feelings of inferiority), the neurotically disposed person is characterized by increased inferiority feelings, underdeveloped social interest, and an exaggerated, uncooperative goal of superiority, these symptoms manifesting themselves as anxiety and more or less open aggression. Accordingly, he solves his problems in a self-centered, private fashion, rather than a task-centered, common-sense fashion, leading to failure. All forms of maladjustment share this constellation. Therapy consists of providing the patient with insight into his mistaken life-style through material furnished by him in the psychiatric interview.

In developing the concept of individual psychology, Adler broke away from the psychoanalytic school of Sigmund Freud. In this development, Adler did call his work free psychoanalysis for a time, but he later rejected the label of "psychoanalyst". His method, involving a holistic approach to the study of character, has been extremely influential in later 20th century counselling and psychiatric strategies.

The term individual psychology does not mean to focus on the individual. Alfred Adler said one must take into account the patient's whole environment, including

the people the patient associates with. The term individual is used to mean the patient is an indivisible whole. Adler shifted the grounds of psychological determinance from sex and libido, the Freudian standpoint, to one based on the individual evaluation of world. He gave special prominence to societal factors. According to him a person has to combat or confront three forces: societal, love-related, and vocational forces. These confrontations determine the final nature of a personality. Adler based his theories on the pre-adulthood development of a person. He laid stress on such areas as hated children, physical deformities at birth, birth order, etc. Adlerian psychology shows parallels with the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow, who acknowledged Adler's influence on his own theories. Both individual psychology and humanistic psychology hold that the individual human being is the best determinant of his or her own needs, desires, interests, and growth.

## **8.2. 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.* Adler reduced all motivation to a single drive, the striving for success or superiority. Adler's own childhood was marked by physical deficiencies and strong feelings of competitiveness with his older brother. Individual psychology holds that everyone begins life with physical deficiencies that activate feelings of inferiority, feelings that motivate a person to strive for either superiority or success. Psychologically unhealthy individuals strive for personal superiority, whereas psychologically healthy people seek success for all humanity. Early in his career, Adler believed that aggression was the dynamic power behind all motivation, but he soon became dissatisfied with this term. After rejecting aggression as a single motivational force, Adler used the term masculine protest, which implied will to power or a domination of others. However, he soon abandoned masculine protest as a universal drive while continuing to give it a limited role in his theory of abnormal development.

Next, Adler called the single dynamic force striving for superiority. In his final theory, however, he limited striving for superiority to those people who strive for personal superiority over others and introduced the term striving for success to describe actions of people who are motivated by highly developed social interest. Regardless of the motivation for striving, each individual is guided by a final goal.

## *The Final Goal*

According to Adler, people strive toward a final goal of either personal superiority or the goal of success for all humankind. In either case, the final goal is fictional and has no objective existence. Nevertheless, the final goal has great significance because it unifies personality and renders all behavior comprehensible. Each person has the power to create a personalized fictional goal, one constructed out of the raw materials provided by heredity and environment. However, the goal is neither genetically nor environmentally determined. Rather, it is the product of the creative power, that is, people's ability to freely shape their behavior and create their own personality. By the time children reach 4 or 5 years of age, their creative power has developed to the point that they can set their final goal. Even infants have an innate drive toward growth, completion, or success. Because infants are small, incomplete, and weak, they feel inferior and powerless. To compensate for this deficiency, they set a fictional goal to be big, complete, and strong. Thus, a person's final goal reduces the pain of inferiority feelings and points that person in the direction of either superiority or success. If children feel neglected or pampered, their goal remains largely unconscious.

Adler hypothesized that children will compensate for feelings of inferiority in devious ways that have no apparent relationship to their fictional goal. The goal of superiority for a pampered girl, for example, may be to make permanent her parasitic relationship with her mother. As an adult, she may appear dependent and self-deprecating, and such behavior may seem inconsistent with a goal of superiority. However, it is quite consistent with her unconscious and misunderstood goal of being a parasite that she set at age 4 or 5, a time when her mother appeared large and powerful, and attachment to her became a natural means of attaining superiority. Conversely, if children experience love and security, they set a goal that is largely conscious and clearly understood. Psychologically secure children strive toward superiority defined in terms of success and social interest. Although their goal never becomes completely conscious, these healthy individuals understand and pursue it with a high level of awareness. In striving for their final goal, people create and pursue many preliminary goals. These sub goals are often conscious, but the connection between them and the final goal usually remains unknown. Furthermore, the relationship among preliminary goals is seldom realized. From the point of view of the final goal, however, they fit together in a self-consistent pattern. Adler used the analogy of the playwright who builds the characteristics and the subplots of the play according to the final goal of the drama. When the final scene is known, all

dialogue and every subplot acquire new meaning. When an individual's final goal is known, all actions make sense and each sub goal takes on new significance.

### *The Striving Force as Compensation*

People strive for superiority or success as a means of compensation for feelings of inferiority or weakness. Adler 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. People are continually pushed by the need to overcome inferiority feelings and pulled by the desire for completion. The minus and plus situations exist simultaneously and cannot be separated because they are two dimensions of a single force. The striving force itself is innate, but its nature and direction are due both to feelings of inferiority and to the goal of superiority. Without the innate movement toward perfection, children would never feel inferior; but without feelings of inferiority, they would never set a goal of superiority or success. The goal, then, is set as compensation for the deficit feeling, but the deficit feeling would not exist unless a child first possessed a basic tendency toward completion. Although the striving for success is innate, it must be developed. At birth it exists as potentiality, not actuality so each person must actualize this potential in his or her own manner. At about age 4 or 5, children begin this process by setting a direction to the striving force and by establishing a goal either of personal superiority or of social success. The goal provides guidelines for motivation, shaping psychological development and giving it an aim.

As a creation of the individual, the goal may take any form. It is not necessarily a mirror image of the deficiency, even though it is a compensation for it. For example, a person with a weak body will not necessarily become a robust athlete but instead may become an artist, an actor, or a writer. Success is an individualized concept and all people formulate their own definition of it. Although creative power is swayed by the forces of heredity and environment, it is ultimately responsible for people's personality. Heredity establishes the potentiality, whereas environment contributes to the development of social interest and courage. The forces of nature and nurture can never deprive a person of the power to set a unique goal or to choose a unique style of reaching for the goal. 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.

### *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 the presence of an inferiority complex. Murderers, thieves, and con artists are obvious examples of people who strive for personal gain. Some people create clever disguises for their personal striving and may consciously or unconsciously hide their self-centeredness behind the cloak of social concern. A college teacher, for example, may appear to have a great interest in his students because he establishes a personal relationship with many of them. By conspicuously displaying much sympathy and concern, he encourages vulnerable students to talk to him about their personal problems. This teacher possesses a private intelligence that allows him to believe that he is the most accessible and dedicated teacher in his college. To a casual observer, he may appear to be motivated by social interest, but his actions are largely self-serving and motivated by overcompensation for his exaggerated feelings of personal superiority.

### *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. People who strive for success rather than personal superiority maintain a sense of self, of course, but they see daily problems from the view of society's development rather than from a strictly personal vantage point. Their sense of personal worth is tied closely to their contributions to human society. Social progress is more important to them than personal credit.

### **8.3. The Theory of Compensation, Defeat and Over-Compensation**

According to Adler, an individual derives his personality traits from these essentially external factors. The character of the individual is formed by his responses to their influence in the following ways:

**Compensation** - Whenever a person suffers from any disadvantages that make him or her inferior to others, his or her main aim becomes to bring those disadvantages to an end. Those who are able to do this become successful in their lives on both social as well as individual bases. In psychology, compensation is a strategy whereby one covers up, consciously or unconsciously, weaknesses, frustrations, desires, or feelings of inadequacy or incompetence in one life area through the gratification or (drive towards) excellence in another area. Compensation can cover up either real or imagined deficiencies and personal or physical inferiority. Positive compensations may help one to overcome one's difficulties. On the other hand, negative compensations do not, which results in a reinforced feeling of inferiority. There are two kinds of negative compensation:

**Resignation** - There are those who give in to their disadvantages and become reconciled to them. Such people are in the majority. The attitude of the world towards them is of a cool, rather uninterested sympathy.

**Overcompensation**- Characterized by a superiority goal, leads to striving for power, dominance, self-esteem, and self-devaluation.

There are some persons who become so infatuated with the idea of compensating for their disadvantages that they end up over-indulging in the pursuit. These are the neurotics. Thus, the external factors are vital in character formation.