4.3: Adler's Individual Psychology

Adler developed the concept of Individual Psychology out of his observation that psychologists were beginning to ignore what he called the unity of the individual:

A survey of the views and theories of most psychologists indicates a peculiar limitation both in the nature of their field of investigation and in their methods of inquiry. They act as if experience and knowledge of mankind were, with conscious intent, to be excluded from our investigations and all value and importance denied to artistic and creative vision as well as to intuition itself. (pg. 1; Adler, 1914/1963)

To summarize Individual Psychology briefly, children begin life with feelings of inferiority toward their parents, as well as toward the whole world. The child’s life becomes an ongoing effort to overcome this inferiority, and the child is continuously restless. As the child seeks superiority it creatively forms goals, even if the ultimate goal is a fictional representation of achieving superiority. Indeed, Adler believed that it is impossible to think, feel, will, or act without the perception of some goal, and that every psychological phenomenon can only be understood if it is regarded as preparation for some goal. Thus, the person's entire life becomes centered on a given plan for attaining the final goal (whatever that may be). Such a perspective must be uniquely individual, since each person’s particular childhood feelings of inferiority, creative style of life, and ultimate goals would be unique to their own experiences (Adler, 1914/1963).

The suggestion that seeking to overcome one’s inferiorities is the driving force underlying personality development is, of course, a significant departure from Freud's suggestion that development revolves around seeking psychosexual gratification. Another important difference is that Adler did not distinguish between the conscious and unconscious minds as Freud had:

The use of the terms "consciousness" and "unconsciousness" to designate distinctive factors is incorrect in the practice of Individual Psychology. Consciousness and unconsciousness move together in the same direction and are not...
contradictions, as is so often believed. What is more, there is no definite line of demarcation between them. It is merely a question of discovering the purpose of their joint movement. (pg. 56; Adler, 1929a)

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**Inferiority and Compensation**

In 1907, Adler published his classic *Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Psychical Compensation*, which was translated into English 10 years later (Adler, 1917). This was primarily a medical article on the consequences of organ inferiority, in which Adler looked at how the nervous system helped the body to adapt to physical infirmities that resulted from, literally, inferior organ development. For example, it is often suggested that people who are blind develop better hearing. However, social psychologists have demonstrated that the social environment can profoundly affect our sensitivity to external stimuli. The reason for this is probably just what Adler described as the primary means through which the brain can compensate for any deficiency: by bringing attention to the processes necessary for compensation. Thus, if a person has difficulty seeing, they pay more careful attention to hearing, as well as to the other senses. However, this is not a perfect system, and it can also lead to over-compensation. As a result, a wide variety of physical symptoms can result from the psyche's efforts (including unconscious efforts) to compensate for some problem. As noted by Freud, hysterical symptoms are typically manifested as physical problems. According to Adler, underlying these physical symptoms, even when they are caused solely by the psyche, there must be some organ inferiority within the body (Adler, 1917).

Adler did not limit his theory of organ inferiority to medical problems or neurotic symptoms, but rather, he expanded the theory to incorporate all aspects of life. **Compensation** refers to the typical manner in which a person seeks to overcome challenges. For example, if one breaks their arm, they learn to function with a cast, or if one loses their eyesight, they learn to use a cane or work with a seeing-eye dog (Dreikurs, 1950; Mosak & Maniacci, 1999). If we examine compensation in a more psychosocial realm, examples might include a college student who cannot find a suitable boyfriend or girlfriend so they focus on becoming a straight A student, a student who does not do well academically focuses their efforts on becoming a star athlete, or an only child who wished to have brothers and sisters has many children of their own (Lundin, 1989). In such instances, compensation leads to balance in one’s life. A weakness, or at least a perceived weakness, is compensated for in other ways (Manaster & Corsini, 1982). **Overcompensation** involves taking compensation to extremes. For example, a person born with a bad foot strives to become a professional dancer, or a person born in poverty strives to become a millionaire and then continues to work 80 hours a week or more striving to become a billionaire. Generally speaking, the mechanisms of personality inferiority are more complex than those of organ inferiority. Likewise, compensation and overcompensation are more complex when they pertain to one’s personality than when they involve physical challenges (Manaster & Corsini, 1982).

When a person finds it difficult to overcome their challenges in life, they can develop what Adler called an **inferiority complex** (Adler, 1928, 1929a, 1931a). Although feelings of inferiority are universal, as is the striving for superiority, people are not created equal. We all have different strengths and weaknesses. However, when an individual cannot compensate for their weaknesses, and their feelings of inferiority overwhelm them, the inferiority complex arises. According to Adler, the term complex is not really accurate, because the so-called inferiority complex is complicated, and it permeates the entire personality. And yet, it may not always be obvious. An individual with an inferiority complex may feel comfortable in situations in which they have enough experience to feel self-assured, although they may create those situations by avoiding competition that might expose their weaknesses (Adler, 1929a). The inferiority complex will show itself, however, in tense or difficult situations, and often takes the form of excuses as to why the individual can’t
pursue a certain course of action. For psychologists, according to Adler, the presence of an inferiority complex can typically be recognized by contradictions, by certain emotions such as doubt, and by generally hesitant behavior. The proper treatment, therefore, is to encourage people, never to discourage them, and to help them understand that they are capable of solving problems and facing the difficulties of life (Adler, 1929a).

When the intense feelings of inferiority associated with the inferiority complex become too much to bear, they can be transformed into a unique delusion that Adler described as the **superiority complex** (Adler, 1928, 1929a, 1931a). The superiority complex should not be viewed as an extension of the normal process of striving for superiority. The superiority complex arises out of the inferiority complex, and is actually an extension of the intense feelings of inferiority. Interestingly, such people typically do not present themselves as superior individuals, instead they may be arrogant, snooty, domineering, or they may cling to prominent and important people. In contrast, people who truly are superior often have a sense of modesty (Lundin, 1989; Mosak & Maniacci, 1999). The complexity of the superiority complex, and its origin in feelings of inferiority and the continued striving for superiority that is universal can be seen not only in neurotic symptoms and other forms of mental illness, but also in criminal behavior:

We see children who start stealing suffering from the feeling of superiority. They believe they are deceiving others; that others do not know they are stealing. Thus they are richer with little effort. This same feeling is very pronounced among criminals who have the idea that they are superior heroes…he wants to arrange matters so that he escapes the solution of the problems of life. Criminality is thus, the result of a superiority complex and not the expression of fundamental and original viciousness. (pp. 80-81; Adler, 1929a)

**Discussion Question:** Adler believed that we all begin life with feelings of inferiority and then strive for superiority. What sort of things have you tried to be really good at in life? Can you remember times when you felt inferior trying to accomplish those same goals?

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**The Style of Life and the Life Plan**

According to Adler, everyone faces difficulties in life, and they strive to overcome those difficulties. As each individual faces their unique difficulties, and strives to compensate in their own characteristic ways, given the environment (or culture) in which they live, the individual develops a sense of meaning for their life and they set a goal for their strivings. Initially Adler referred to the consistent movement toward this overriding goal as a **life plan**, but that term proved to be somewhat confusing. So, Adler chose instead to refer to the pursuit of one’s goal as the **style of life**. The style of life unifies the personality, as it is based on one’s early life experiences. However, Individual Psychology looks not to the past, but rather to the future. If we know a person’s style of life, we can predict their future actions (Adler, 1929a, 1931a).

It is not always easy to recognize the style of life, however, particularly in a psychologically healthy person or during times of relative calm. It is when a person faces a new situation, or a new difficulty, that the style of life becomes clear to others. For the normal person, the style of life is a framework within which the person is adapted to their society in such a way that the society benefits from the work of the person and the person themselves has the energy and courage to face any problems and difficulties that arise (Adler, 1929a). The style of life encompasses our individual creativity, the ways in which we solve problems and compensate for inferiorities, our attitudes, opinions, and goals. It unifies and expresses our personality, provides consistency for how we live our life, and helps us to find our place in the world (Adler, 1931a; Dreikurs, 1950; Lundin, 1989; Mosak & Maniacci, 1999).
The style of life is established fairly early in childhood, which can be a serious problem when it proves to be a dysfunctional style of life. The inferiority complex is, of course, one faulty style of life. When an inferiority complex arises out of an actual organ inferiority it can be particularly troublesome. Robert Lundin (1989) described the case of a senior student he knew in college who was only 5’3” tall (very short for a man, though this would really only be a perceived inferiority). He was extremely arrogant and hostile toward younger students, claiming to be intellectually superior in every regard. He even offered to be Lundin’s roommate, since Lundin obviously needed his help to improve Lundin’s deficient personality! Lundin declined the offer. Adler noted that organ inferiority is not always a negative situation, and given the advances in prosthetic devices that exist today, it is even truer now that organ inferiority does not necessarily diminish one’s quality of life. However, Adler emphasized that what matters most is how the individual experiences the weakness of their organ inferiority. Some try to avoid or deny the problem, others constantly “wrestle and struggle” with their difficulties. In the end, it comes down to the creative power of the individual to adapt (see below; Adler, 1932a/1964).

In addition to the style of life of that can result from organ inferiority (or perceived organ inferiority), Adler discussed two other factors that commonly lead to dysfunctional styles of life, and which can be attributed primarily to parental influence: pampering and neglect. The pampered style of life was of particular concern to Adler. He was not referring to children who are loved and cared for intimately, but to children whose parents constantly hover over them, solve every problem, and relieve the child of any duties or responsibilities. As a result, the child never learns to take care of itself or to interact with others in a cooperative manner.

The more deeply I have delved into the problem of neurosis and searched the cases presented, the more clearly have I come to see that in every individual with a neurosis some degree of pampering can be traced...Under such circumstances the child develops like a parasite... (pp. 88-89; Adler, 1932a/1964)

Extending this idea, Adler wrote that whether one is dealing with “difficult children, nervous or insane persons, suicides, delinquents, drug-addicts, or perverts, etc.” there is a lack of social feeling (Adler, 1964). In other words, they simply do not function well in relationship to others because they have never had to. As for the neglected child, one who is unwanted, they have had no opportunity for social interaction whatsoever, since their own family fails to interact with them. In cases of suicide, Adler believed that even death can be desired as a means of revenge against those who have hurt or neglected a child by showing others what they have lost in the one they failed to love (Adler, 1967). Since feelings of neglect are relative, pampered children often find themselves in situations, later in life, where they feel neglected, since they may no longer receive the pampering to which they have become accustomed (Adler, 1932a/1964).

**Discussion Question:** How would you describe your style of life? Adler believed that dysfunctional styles of life often result from either pampering or neglect. Do you know anyone whose style of life clearly reflects how they were raised? Are they someone you like to spend time with, or someone you would rather avoid?

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**Social Interest and Cooperation**

Adler believed that the right way to achieve superiority was through **social interest** and the **cooperation** that naturally follows. This is not some high-minded philosophy, however, but simple reality. According to Adler, “we are in the midst of the stream of evolution.” As such, the human species as a whole has sought superiority, just as each individual seeks...
their own personal superiority (Adler, 1964). The individual’s weakness causes them to seek support from others, by living within a society:

All persons feel inadequate in certain situations. They feel overwhelmed by the difficulties of life and are incapable of meeting them single-handed. Hence one of the strongest tendencies in man has been to form groups in order that he may live as a member of a society and not as an isolated individual. This social life has without doubt been a great help to him in overcoming his feeling of inadequacy and inferiority. We know that this is the case with animals, where the weaker species always live in groups...On the other hand, gorillas, lions, and tigers can live isolated because nature has given them the means of self-protection. A human being has not their great strength, their claws, nor their teeth, and so cannot live apart. Thus we find that the beginning of social life lies in the weakness of the individual. (pp. 60-61; Adler, 1929a)

This evolutionary perspective provides an explanation for the paradox that Individual Psychology is focused largely on social relationships! Once again, we know (though perhaps unconsciously) that alone we are weak and inferior, but together we can accomplish great things. Adler’s hopeful vision for the future is that someday humanity’s social feeling will overcome everything that opposes it, and people will live in harmony. In the meantime, however, he acknowledges that many things still oppose it, and work to destroy the social feelings and social interest of children: sexism, racism, poverty, crime, the death penalty, suicide, greed, mistreatment of the poor, the handicapped, and the elderly, and all forms prejudice, discrimination, and intolerance (Adler, 1964). It is not an easy challenge facing humanity, but Adler suggested that the path toward harmony lies, in part, in recognizing the three main ties that every person must take into account. First, we are tied to this one world, the earth. We must learn how to survive here, given whatever advantages and disadvantages that means. Second, we are not the only member of the human race. Through cooperation and association we can find strength for all, and we can ensure the future of humanity. Finally, we must accept that there are two sexes. For Adler, this last tie is resolved primarily through love and marriage. While this may sound like a product of Adler’s cultural upbringing, it also implies caring for and respecting members of the other sex. Otherwise, love is a word used without meaning. Adler proposed that if we give meaning to life through the recognition of these three ties to our environment, then others can share in our meaning of life, and the benefit will then return to us (Adler, 1931a).

Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\)

*Children often cooperate without any need for encouragement, especially when one of them has a skill that another lacks.*

In more practical terms, social interest is evident in cooperation. In order for an individual to overcome their own feelings of inferiority they must know that they are valuable, which comes only from contributing to the common welfare. Adler felt that those who seek personal power are pursuing a false goal, and they will eventually disappear from life altogether. However, by contributing to family and society, either through raising children or contributing to the success of one’s culture or society, one can claim a sense of immortality. Individual psychology is based on the premise that when a person realizes that the common good is essential to the development of humanity, then they will pursue personal development that is in accord with the greater good. They will recognize both the good and challenges that come their way as belonging to all, and they will
cooperate in seeking to solve the challenges. They will not ask for anything in return, since they recognize that whatever they do to benefit others is ultimately to their own benefit as well (Adler, 1933/1964). This perspective is surprisingly close to Eastern philosophies and the concepts of interbeing and karma, though Adler’s religious references are primarily Christian (though born Jewish, Adler later became a Christian).

In American society, work is often done by teams. The short definition of a team is two or more individuals, with different roles, who socially interact in order to pursue some common goal. Teams can lead to successful outcomes in a wide variety of settings, such as in software development, Olympic hockey, disease outbreak responses, or the unexpected damage to a spacecraft like Apollo 13 (for two excellent and entertaining movies on teamwork, see Miracle [O’Connor & Guggenheim, 2004] and Apollo 13 [Howard, Broyles, Jr., & Reinert, 1995]). However, teams can also lead to group failures, such as the international intelligence failures leading up to the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the Space Shuttle Columbia accident, or the widely reported, storm-related deaths on Mt. Everest in 1997 (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Marks, 2006; for more on Mt. Everest see Boukreev & DeWalt, 1997; Krakauer, 1997). Given the importance of teamwork, both in personal settings and within organizations, there has been a great deal of research on teams, addressing cognitive, motivational, and behavioral factors, as well as information on effective team design, team training, and team leadership. Despite the wealth of information on both the positive and negative factors involved in teamwork, there is an interesting contradiction in the Western world:

…We school our children as individuals. We hire, train, and reward employees as individuals. And, yet, we have great faith that individuals thrown together into a team with little thought devoted to team composition, training and development, and leadership will be effective and successful. (pg. 115; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006)

**Discussion Question:** Working in teams can turn out good or bad, depending on dynamics of the team and the individuals involved. Are you actively involved in any teamwork? Does your team work well together, or do the dynamics of the team cause problems and interfere with accomplishing your goals?

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**The Life Tasks - Work, Communal Life, and Love**

Based on the three ties described above, our ties to earth, humanity, and the opposite sex, Adler described three life tasks: **work**, **communal life**, and **love**. Work relates to the earth in an evolutionary sense, dating back to when our ancient ancestors were hunter/gatherers dependent on the environment for food and shelter. According to Adler, all of the questions of life can be found within these three tasks, which challenge us continuously throughout our lives. They tasks are not unrelated, since each one depends upon the successful pursuit of the other two. Given this interrelationship, Adler believed that how a person approaches each of these tasks, through their style of life, reveals a great deal about what they view as the meaning of life. It is necessary, of course, for there to be balance. For example, a person in an unhappy marriage might spend a great deal of time at work. This represents a mistaken style of life (Adler, 1931a, 1964). Worse still, is someone who fails to pursue any of the life tasks:

Suppose, for example, we consider a man whose love-life is incomplete, who makes no efforts in his profession, who has few friends and who finds contact with his fellows painful. From the limits and restrictions of his life we may conclude that he feels **being alive** as a difficult and dangerous thing, offering few opportunities and many defeats. (pg. 7; Adler, 1931a)

The importance of the work task is to be found in the fact that we must do **something** with our time. As people began to
cooperate, they were able to divide their labors. Some would hunt, some would farm, some became craftsmen, some raised the young, and eventually others served in the armies that protected all the rest. In this manner, each person served a valuable role within society (even if the role was not prestigious), and everyone benefited from the ability of each person to become more of an expert in their role. Of course, this sort of social cooperation is the second task of life, the communal life or, as it is sometimes referred to, having friends. Working with others for the common good can be quite difficult if people are doing so only for their own benefit, and it they distrust or fear those they seem to be cooperating with. As societies became more advanced, and education became an important part of society, most societies encourage social interest as an aspect of education. In America, for example, we talk about children learning to be good citizens, and schools include many civics lessons. In addition, societies establish not only formal and informal guidelines and norms for acceptable behavior, but actual laws are written to punish those who act in defiance of the common good. Not that this is easy! The first amendment to the American constitution guarantees free speech, which includes the right to challenge the very existence of our form of government. However, it is generally recognized that the greater good is served by protecting the people from possible abuses of power by the government. Without getting into a discussion of politics, this balance, which seeks to serve the best interests of the community of citizens, has resulted in one of the longest lasting governments in the world today.

When Adler referred to the third task of life, love, he was primarily talking about choosing a partner to bear and raise children. When a child is first born, the love of its mother is the basis for the child’s development of social feelings. If a child is neglected, they do not learn how to relate to others, or if they are spoiled, they do not need to relate to others. An early challenge for the child is found in the nature of the father, and then any siblings who may be a part of the family. They typically do not approach the child with the same tender love as the mother. If the mother protects the child from this, spoiling and coddling the infant, a disordered style of life develops, but if the mother leaves the child to face this new challenge on its own, they must rely on their creative powers to adapt to these different social relationships. Children readily have this capacity, if they are allowed to utilize it. Later in life, each person must choose a mate in order to have their own children, and their ability to adapt to relationships with love interests will, obviously, depend on their own development earlier in life. Active, friendly members of a community will have more opportunities to meet someone they are truly attracted to. Individuals who are successful and productive in their work will be better able to provide for a family. And of course, the ultimate existence of each member of the community depends on continued procreation of the species. Thus, work, communal life, and love come together within a healthy society for everyone’s benefit (Adler, 1931a, 1964; Lundin, 1989; Mosak & Maniacci, 1999).

connections across cultures: Randy Kearse and using prison as an opportunity for change

One of the challenges to social cooperation is the ability to communicate. Communication takes place in at least two important ways: language and shared experiences/goals. If we cannot understand what a person is saying, then communication is obviously difficult. But even if we speak the same language, if our entire perspective on life is different, particularly the direction in which we are headed (our style of life), it can be even more difficult to really communicate. Randy Kearse is a man who has lived outside of what many of us consider mainstream America. He grew up in a Brooklyn, NY ghetto, where he became well versed in street talk, or what he refers to as hip-hop and urban slanguage (Kearse, 2006a). Despite coming from a relatively stable family (his mother was a teacher and all of his brothers and his sister graduated from high school), he descended into a life of drugs and crime,
eventually spending over 13 years in a federal prison for dealing illegal drugs. This introduced Kearse to a large, and growing, subculture in America: the prison population. Kearse learned one lesson very clearly in prison: he hated it! He hated people having such power over him, he hated the disrespect his mother had to endure when she visited him, he hated the food, he hated having the guards read his mail, etc., ad infinitum.

With so many reasons to hate prison, there was no way I was gonna put myself back in the same situation again. Brothers complain about being locked up everyday all day while they’re there, but when they get a chance to run the streets again their hatred for prison life fades away. That’s crazy! (pg. 132; Kearse, 2006b)

But how does one stay out of prison? In Changin’ Your Game Plan! (Kearse, 2006b), Kearse offers some very practical steps. But more importantly, he discusses why it matters, and how one needs to change their mindset in order to be successful. His advice fits well with Adler’s emphasis on social interest and cooperation, as well as with Adler’s three life tasks. As Kearse says, what good is street pride when you don’t have the respect of your mother, your children, and other people who know what you’re capable of accomplishing?

Kearse believes that everyone has a purpose in life. Even prisoners serving life sentences can preach to others about straightening out their lives so the ones who do get out of prison can stay out. For his own part, Kearse is trying to set a good example now that he is out. He talks about the misguided sense of pride that keeps people from working minimum wage jobs when they come home. Most people in prison do not want their children to live such a life, but can they really set the right example when they themselves get out of prison? One of the most important things to realize is that their style of life has helped to create the problems that exist in their community:

We have a real obligation to make these changes while incarcerated because a lot of us are to blame for the condition our neighborhoods are in today. We were major contributors to the chaos, mayhem and destruction that have plagued our communities…The saddest thing you can see while incarcerated, is a youngster young enough to be your son walk through the doors. (pg. 133; Kearse, 2006b)

In order to help their communities and their families, Kearse emphasizes that individuals returning home from prison need to get a job and work for an honest living. Kearse tells New Yorkers exactly where to go and how to go about getting ID and a social security card. He recommends getting a job as a messenger, especially if you have a driver’s license and can afford to buy a van (or if you save up the money to buy a van). For most of us, having these things is simply taken for granted, but not so for many poor people growing up in the city where such things may not be necessary (especially if one works illegally). One of the advantages of having a messenger/delivery job is that
one gets to travel around, meet different people, and become aware of different opportunities. This proved very helpful to Kearse as he pursued his dream of publishing *Street Talk: Da Official Guide to Hip-Hop & Urban Slanguage* (Kearse, 2006a). Curiously, the book is not complete. In acceptance of his publisher’s concerns (representing the community), the commercially available version left out the most derogatory slang pertaining to women, race, sexual preference, ethnicity, and religion. Kearse later published a supplemental version (“Da Grimy Version”) through a private site. As Kearse became more experienced, he established his own publishing company for his second book, *Changin’ Your Game Plan!*, and he is now working on an autobiography. Randy Kearse is working hard to make a better life for himself, set an example for his community, and to honor the mother who raised him to have ambition and dreams. His mother still loved Kearse when he was sent to prison, but her patience was limited:

Once I received my sentence my mother told me straight up, “I’ll ride this time out with you, but if you get back out here and get caught up in them streets again don’t call me,” and I can’t blame her for that. How much can a mother take seeing her child going back and forth to prison? (pg. 33; Kearse, 2006b)

It would be very difficult for most of us to imagine what prison life and culture is like, or even what it would be like to get caught up in the judicial system. But for people who live in difficult circumstances, it can be just as difficult to avoid getting caught up in a style of life that promises instant gratification, but which costs a lot of money. People who try to take shortcuts, such as stealing what they want, or selling drugs to make a lot of money, end up with little to show for their life except “a gang of years in prison.” Escaping this style of life requires a plan, and even more so the motivation for making that plan work:

Coming out of prison you have to have a plan. If you don’t, the chance of you returning to prison is great and you and I both know these people aren’t playing. They’ll lock your ass up for a hun’ned years and not care…Shit is real. (pg. xxiii; Kearse, 2006b)

**The Creative Power of the Individual and Fictional Finalism**

The science of Individual Psychology developed out of the effort to understand that mysterious creative power of life - that power which expresses itself in the desire to develop, to strive and to achieve - and even to compensate for defeats in one direction by striving for success in another. (pg. 32; Adler, 1929a)

Adler believed that we are all born with a creative force: the **creative power of the individual**. He did not reject the concepts of heredity, temperament, or disposition, but he emphasized that it not so important what we are born with, but rather what we do with it (Adler, 1932a/1964). As noted above, infants are inferior, so everyone begins life with feelings of inferiority. This leads to the striving for superiority, and the development of a style of life, which is aimed toward some goal. The nature of that style of life is unique because it is created by the child, and it is done very early in life. This is not
a deterministic perspective, this creation of the style of life is just that, creative, and therefore it must be unique (hence, *Individual Psychology*). Since Adler believed that all thought and behavior was oriented toward some goal, there must be some goal that underlies the manner in which the style of life is created. Since a child cannot see into the future and create a specific goal in life, Adler proposed that we are guided by a fictional goal, the so-called fictional finalism (Adler, 1914/1963, 1928, 1929a, 1932a/1964; Lundin, 1989; Manaster & Corsini, 1982).

The fictional final goal involves the sentiment of superiority, or at least the elevation of the personality to an extent that makes life seem worth living (Adler, 1928). Thus, it does not need to be precisely defined, which is important for our consideration that it is created by a young child. And yet it exists within the child’s mind, it provides the framework within which the style of life is creatively formed, and it serves as the child’s goal in life (though it remains primarily unconscious). It is also important to recognize that although this goal is fictional, it is entirely positive, it is a healthy and natural motivational force (Lundin, 1989). The fictional finalism should definitely not be mistaken for fictive superiority. Fictive superiority is the imagination, or false belief, that one is actually superior. It is a typical neurotic symptom that stems, primarily, from having been pampered. A pampered child is superior, at least in the sense that everything is done for them. However, adult life no longer sustains that delusion, yet the child has never learned how to adapt to life’s challenges, their style of life is set in the expectation of challenges being solved for them. A healthy child, on the other hand, has learned to face challenges, and to strive toward overcoming them. Thus, the healthy child develops a style of life that incorporates the process of facing and overcoming life’s obstacles, and this carries over into a healthy adulthood (Adler, 1932b/1964).

Within his discussion of the creative power of the individual and the fictional finalism, Adler began to address what can be viewed as the foundation for cognitive psychology and cognitive therapy (see Chapter 12):

In a word, I am convinced that a person’s behaviour springs from his idea. We should not be surprised at this, because our senses do not receive actual facts, but merely a subjective image of them - a reflection of the external world. (pg. 19; Adler, 1964)

According to Adler, the prototype of the style of life, as it points toward the fictional finalism, is set in a particular orientation. Throughout the individual’s life, their perceptions of the world are then constrained to “fall into a groove established by the line of direction” (Adler, 1929a). He referred to this phenomenon as the scheme of apperception. As a result of this scheme, the individual interprets experiences before they are accepted, and the interpretation always agrees with the original meaning that the individual has given to their life. When the individual has developed a mistaken meaning to life, or when experience cannot be reconciled with the meaning they hold, they may be forced to change their scheme of apperception. This is not easy, however, and only occurs when there is sufficient social pressure to do so (Adler, 1931a).

**Discussion Question:** Adler described fictive superiority as the mistaken belief that one is superior to others. What do you think about people who think they are great, who think they know everything about everything, and can do anything at all, but who really are no different than anyone else?
the rest of the family, and school teachers). The emphasis in much of his work was on ensuring that children are brought up in the best way possible from the very beginning of life. We have already examined the importance of the mother’s role, and that she needs to be supportive but must not spoil her child. A child who is unable to resolve life’s problem without the assistance of others will grow up into a neurotic person demonstrating a dysfunctional style of life (Adler, 1913a/1963). Since this is something that happens within the family, the parents obviously cannot serve as part of the solution for this problem. Thus, Adler turned his attention to school teachers.

Adler believed that a person is educated when it becomes clear that they have become more relevant to more people (Adler, 1958). In other words, they become a more active and involved member of their community, society, and perhaps even the whole world. School represents a new situation for a child. If they have been raised well, they pass this test rather easily. If not, the defects in their style of life become evident. School work requires cooperation with both the teacher and the other students, and the ability to cooperate is probably more important than the child’s innate intellectual abilities. Adler did not dismiss the importance of I.Q. (though he did suggest that the child and the parents should never be told what it is), but he pointed out that a child’s ability to concentrate on school subjects is primarily dependent on the child’s interest in the teacher (Adler, 1930b). So once again, we see the three life tasks coming into play. School work is the child’s work, and it must take place within a communal setting (the classroom). But what about love? Whether you want to call it support, encouragement, caring, motivation, or love, Adler was clear in terms of what he thought about the “peculiar position” held by teachers:

The teacher, professional or amateur, must teach the simple thing: love, and call it by its simple name: love. Almost since the beginnings of recorded history, however, the teacher has been in a peculiar position: he is facing pupils, children or adults, who do not expect that the thing they ought to learn is so simple. (pg. 115; Adler, 1958)

According to Adler, it is the role of teachers to recognize the difficulties that children cannot overcome, and to “correct the mistakes of the parents.” An essential aspect of this “correction,” however, is that it must never be punitive. Adler believed that if teachers scold or criticize students who cannot connect with their teacher or their classmates, then the child will realize they were right to dislike school. Rather, teachers must help children to connect with themselves, and then reach out to connect with others (Adler, 1931a). But what about children who cannot redirect their style of life or face up to the challenges they encounter?

Discussion Question: Teachers play an important role in each person’s development, according to Adler. Who were the teachers who really influenced you, and were they good teachers who helped you, or bad teachers who inspired you to be a better person than you saw in them?

Adler wrote a great deal about guiding children, and about helping them to avoid and recover from delinquency (Adler, 1918/1963, 1930a, 1931a, 1935/1964, 1963), and his daughter Alexandra joined him in this endeavor (Alexandra Adler, 1930a,b). Often the discussion addresses the primary problem in Adler’s view: a lack of social interest due to having been pampered. In addition, both Adler and his daughter bring into consideration an interesting family dynamic that appears to play some role: the child’s birth order. An only child is in an unfavorable situation. Although they certainly receive attention and support from their parents, since they receive all of it they tend to be pampered and they lack practice in being sociable. As they leave the pampered surroundings of the home, such as when they go to school, the child grows up fighting against their environment and trying to dominate it. Their solutions can be passive, such as being timid, anxious, or routinely getting “sick,” or their solutions can be active, such as being excessively talkative, defiant, or combative (Alexandra Adler, 1930a; Adler, 1929/1964). They face the potential of becoming like parasites, people who

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Psychology/Book%3A_Personality_Theory_in_a_Cultural_Context_(Kelland)/04%…
do nothing but enjoy life while expecting others to take care of them (Adler, 1928). The situation can be much worse, however, for the **oldest child**. The oldest child was, for a time, an only child, and received all of the privilege and pampering associated with that position. With the arrival of the next child, however, they lose their privileged position, and the mother must be particularly attentive to the new infant. The oldest child is **dethroned**, and this can feel quite tragic, leading to consuming jealousy and a bitter struggle to regain the parent’s attention (Adler, 1929/1964, 1931a, 1963). Dethroning is an experience that always leaves a great impression, and can lead to a critical attitude toward the mother and a turning away toward the father (Adler, 1929/1964). According to Adler, one often finds the experience of being dethroned in the past of problem children, neurotics, criminals, drunkards, and perverts (Adler, 1931a). Nonetheless, being the oldest child also has distinct advantages. Amongst the siblings, the first born is typically the biggest and more experienced child. They have a certain power over the other children, in that they are often given greater responsibility, including, perhaps, the responsibility of caring for their younger brothers and sisters. They tend to be guardians of law and order, and they have an especially high valuation of power (Adler, 1928). Adler was careful to point out, however, that too much is often made of his theories on birth order. It is not the birth order, per se, which determines the nature of development. For example, if the oldest child is not competitive, the second child may develop as if they were the first child. Similarly, if two children are born much later than their older siblings, the elder of those two may develop the characteristics of a first born.

In those cases where the challenges of adolescence become too much for a child, they begin to creatively protect themselves by doing things such as forging report cards, skipping school, etc. As they meet others doing the same things, they join with them, form gangs, and may well start out on a road that leads to a life of crime. Demonstrating his great concern for the individual, however, Adler wrote:

> All this can be avoided if we accept the point of view of Individual Psychology that no child should be thought hopeless. We must feel that a method can always be found to help a child. Even in the worst of circumstances there is always a particular way of approach - but this of course needs to be found. (pg. 179; Adler, 1930b)

In a recent special issue of the *American Psychologist*, a series of articles were presented focusing on effective, evidence-based prevention programs designed to increase the number of children and youth who will succeed and contribute both in school and in life (Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). In accordance with Adler’s theories, effective parenting seems to be the best way to reduce adolescent problem behaviors, and the family can be strengthened through approaches such as behavioral parent training, family skills training, and family therapy (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003). School-based prevention programs can also be beneficial, but it is important that educational approaches coordinate social and emotional learning with more traditional academic learning (Greenberg, et al., 2003). Since the problems of adolescence are so variable, including such things as alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse, violence, delinquency, mental illness, etc., and since they affect so many children, approaches that attempt to intervene with one child at a time may not be adequate. Accordingly, community interventions become important, and may go so far as to require coordinated national efforts, such as Head Start or the combined efforts of the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Environmental Protection Agency to reduce lead poisoning (Ripple & Zigler, 2003; Wandersman & Florin, 2003). And last but not least, health care providers can play an important role in ensuring the psychological well-being of their patients, as well as their physical health (Johnson & Millstein, 2003). Indeed, Adler quoted the renowned Rudolf Virchow (one of the founders of cellular pathology; who coined the terms thrombosis, embolism, and leukemia, among many other accomplishments) in saying: “Physicians will eventually become the educators of humanity” (pg. 317; Adler, 1918/1963; see also Knopf & Wexberg,
Perhaps the most important aspect of these studies is the concerted effort to combine scientific research with clinical practice and experience, as well as doing so in socioculturally relevant ways (Biglan, et al., 2003; Nation, et al., 2003). Echoing Adler’s call from 1930, and moving toward its answer:

If researchers can foster increased use of scientific practices in these ways, it is possible to achieve a society in which the largest possible proportion of children experience healthy, happy, and successful development and arrive at adulthood with the social, emotional, and cognitive skills they need to lead healthy and successful lives. (pg. 438; Biglan et al., 2003)

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**The Psychology of Women**

Adler’s views on the psychology of women could not have been more different than those of Freud. As someone who questioned cultural discrimination long before most, Adler considered women to be equal to men, and he described the belief that they were inferior as a myth. A division of labor has always been an important part of the communal life of the human species. When neighboring groups came into conflict, it was the larger, stronger men who did most of the fighting to protect the group. According to Adler, men extended this conflict and feeling of power to the subjugation of women. Ever since, men have enjoyed privileges that were denied to women, and this has been maintained primarily through force, or the threat of force, but also through indoctrination and education (Adler, 1910/1978, 1927/1978, 1928). Adler himself avoided the use of the term “opposite sex,” a term that implies an adversarial relationship, preferring instead to use the term “other sex” when referring to women (Manaster & Corsini, 1982).

Adler recognized that what women really desire is the privilege that men enjoy, but this is not unique to women. There are also men, or boys, who are not dominant, and they also strive for superiority and privilege. At birth, of course, both male and female infants are helpless and inferior, and must begin to strive for superiority. The form that this striving takes is something Adler called the **masculine protest**. It was not his intention to suggest that masculine traits of dominance and aggression make men better than women, but this was the nature of the times in which he lived. It is purely cultural that the male gender role includes strength, knowledge, physical activity, etc., whereas the female gender role includes submissiveness, weakness, the desire for physical and emotional closeness, etc. All children display some degree of these traits, but society directs boys toward the male role, and girls toward the female role (Adler, 1910/1978, 1912a/1963, 1928, 1929/1964). We can now recognize what many consider Freud’s great mistake regarding the psychology of women. Women who display masculine traits were seen as neurotic by Freud, but Adler viewed them as protesting the cultural denigration of women. Still, it is not easy to challenge the nature of society, so Adler still acknowledged that women were more likely to be neurotic than men. However, Adler attributes the neurosis of most women to masculine protest, not to the inability to resolve a woman’s penis envy! In 1910, just as Adler was about to break away from Freud’s Psychoanalytic Society, Adler proposed that the great Oedipus complex is only a small part, just a stage, of the masculine protest, for both men and women (Adler, 1910/1978).

**Discussion Question:** Adler described masculine protest as a cultural phenomenon in which women, and even some men, strive to act masculine in order to ensure the privilege reserved only for men. Can you think of any strong women whose career or style of life fits into this theory? What about any men you know (or know of)?
Are strong women just that, or are they acting out their masculine protest?