

# Introduction

*They may be my enemies—that I cannot help—but I will not be theirs.*

—Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler wanted to help people get along with their family, friends, and others. He valued the role of cooperation with and connectedness to the world around each person (Adler, 1938; Ansbacher, 1992a; King & Shelley, 2008). His message stressed the power of personal choice; the universal fellowship of human beings; the importance of a positive, encouraging life focus; the eradication of social inequality; and the primacy of social relationships.

Alfred Adler was a pivotal figure in the history of psychotherapy. Although he originally was a colleague and early supporter of Sigmund Freud, Adler developed his own theories of the nature of humankind and soon split off from Freud to pursue these ideas (Fiebert, 1997). The split or

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*Adlerian Psychotherapy*, by J. Carlson and M. Englar-Carlson

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disaffiliation from Freud by Adler—and later by Carl Jung—has been well documented in the history of psychology (Ellenberger, 1981; Handlbauer, 1998), as Freud, Jung, and Adler are considered the founders of modern psychotherapy. Yet it is strange to note that Freud and Jung seemed to have maintained “fame” and name recognition while Adler is not as prominent. However, Adler’s ideas, unlike Freud’s and Jung’s, seem to be the ones that have lasted and comprise the core ingredients of most modern approaches to psychotherapy. Although his name has faded into the background, his ideas have remained at the forefront. He has become one of the most influential, yet most unacknowledged, psychologists in the field of psychotherapy.

Adler envisioned a psychology of growth, where people could strive to overcome difficulties and actually change their lives. Even though Alfred Adler inspired others (e.g., Ellis, Beck, Maslow, & Rogers) to incorporate his ideas into their emerging theories, the Adlerian approach itself has remained a comprehensive model of psychotherapy, one not well-known although the component parts seem to be everywhere.

It is fascinating to us that Adler’s original ideas are consistent with the state of modern practice—even though his entire model was created nearly 100 years ago! His vision of the equality of people, encouragement, the search for what is right or positive, the emphasis on mental health and relationships, the concept of social interest, and the need to consider cultural and contextual factors are examples of cutting-edge topics with which Adler engaged to help people grow and develop their potential. Surprisingly, these ideas and many others are the bases of today’s approaches to helping (Carlson, 2015a), yet there is often little reference or recognition given to Alfred Adler.

Adler’s ideas are at the heart of most of the contemporary or Neo-Freudian approaches (e.g., Horney, Sullivan, & Fromm) to helping. There was actually so much similarity between the Adlerian and Neo-Freudian approaches that several scholars have suggested that these approaches should correctly be called neo-Adlerian (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999). Most of the leading contemporary psychotherapy approaches stress social relations and not just biological factors, striving for self-actualization and

not being driven by the sex instinct, a subjective rather than objective approach to helping and the power of the present rather than the impact of early experiences. Adler stressed the importance of the relationship and using empathy as a key strategy for helping. His approach is at the root of cognitive behavioral, family, existential, phenomenological, schema, humanistic, and person-centered approaches (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Bitter, 2013; Carlson, 2015a; Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006; Corey, 2016; Norcross, Hedges, & Prochaska, 2002; Watts & LaGuardia, 2015). A special issue of *The Journal of Individual Psychology* on neo-Adlerian approaches to psychotherapy will be published in 2017. The special issue will highlight the components of the leading therapy approaches that parallel Adler's theory and practice.

The individual psychology of Alfred Adler is based on a phenomenological, holistic understanding of human behavior. Adler used the term *individual psychology* for his approach in order to emphasize the indivisible (undivided or whole) nature of our personalities and refer to the essential unity of the individual psyche. Adlerians focus on holism and how each person moves through life, noting that one cannot understand an individual by analyzing their parts (i.e., reductionism), but all aspects of the person must be understood in relationship to the total pattern and in connection to social systems (Maniacci, Sackett-Maniacci, & Mosak, 2014). For example, you don't have to listen to the entire song before being able to state that it is by Beethoven. It is only necessary to uncover the pattern or melody to understand. The phenomenological perspective suggests that each person sees situations from a unique point of view. We live our life and "act as if" our view of the world is accurate or correct. When our views are distorted, our thinking becomes faulty, our emotions destructive, and our behavior inappropriate.

The Adlerian-trained psychotherapist believes that all behavior has a purpose and occurs in a social context, noting that one's cognitive orientation and *lifestyle* (literally one's style of dealing with life) is created in the first few years of life and molded within the initial social setting, the family constellation. The family constellation, including family atmosphere, family values, and gender lines, proposes that your basic birth

order (psychological, not ordinal) in the family emphasizes different worldviews and life demands in order to belong within the family system. This position in your family influences your lifestyle. Each person is unique, and their style of life (i.e., lifestyle) is formed partly by seeing how other family members react to different behaviors and attitudes and partly from conclusions drawn as a child. The lifestyle is the characteristic way that we act, think, and perceive and the way we live. It is from the lifestyle that we select the methods for coping with life's challenges and tasks.

As mentioned previously, Adlerians understand all behavior as goal-directed. People continually strive to attain in the future what they believe is important or significant. Adler believed that for all people there are three basic life tasks: work, friendship, and love or intimacy. The work task is realized when work is meaningful and satisfying. The friendship task is achieved through satisfying relationships with others. The love or intimacy task is addressed by learning to love oneself as well as another. Contemporary Adlerian theorists have outlined three additional tasks, suggesting a need to master the recreational and spiritual tasks of life (Maniacci et al., 2014) as well as the task of parenting and the family (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987). Mentally healthy people strive to master each of these tasks, which ultimately represent the challenges of life.

Adlerian theory purports that humans are social beings and therefore all behavior is socially embedded and has social meaning (Watts, 2000b). Adler emphasized the importance of relationships and being connected to others, including the larger community in which people reside. People are viewed as always trying to belong and fit into the social milieu. The outside world shapes their consciousness, as does the world of the family. A hallmark of Adlerian theory is the emphasis on *social interest*, which is a feeling of cooperation with people, the sense of belonging to and participating in the common good. Social interest can be equated with empathy and compassion for others. Adlerians value social interest to the extent that it is viewed as a measure of mental health, noting that as social interest develops, feelings of inferiority and destructive behaviors decrease (Ansbacher, 1991, 1992b; Bickhard & Ford, 1991). Adler's aim was the development of a

philosophy of living that would produce a democratic family structure and a healthy social interest resulting in an ideal culture for child development (Dufrene, 2011).

Social inequality, in Adler's view, is a disease that harms entire populations. He was one of the leading advocates for the rights of women, children, and other groups marginalized by their social context. Adler promoted equal pay for women in the workplace, addressed issues of violence against women in society, and more generally promoted social equality as a mechanism for improved psychological functioning (Bitter, Robertson, Healey, & Jones-Cole, 2009). He was well aware that the health of the powerful and the marginalized were connected and that the duality of oppression meant that all people suffer in the face of social inequality. His ideas would parallel those of contemporary psychologist Daniel Goleman (2015), who has promoted the importance of emotional, social, and ecological intelligence. Goleman, like Adler, understands that happiness and satisfaction in life are results of our relationships to self, others, work, and the environment. Recently, Goleman has partnered with the Nobel Peace Prize winner, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, to emphasize the importance of compassion and social interest. Their views also parallel those of Adler's social interest, also called *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, or community focus. Adlerian theory is designed to provide opportunities for an individual's psychological health to flourish in a community where social equality prevails. It introduces the possibility of creating a society in which psychopathology is not only treatable but also preventable (Dufrene, 2011).

Adlerians understand the individual within their social context. Therefore, the Adlerian is interested in the impact of culture and contextual factors on the individual. This contextual understanding is so embedded in the essence of the approach that those who study Adler's theory often miss it. Carlson and Sperry (1998), as well as Watts (2003), attempted to emphasize this aspect when they wrote about how Adler was one of the originators of the constructivist approach. The community, for example, was easy to see in Adler's early writings. He wrote about how circus performers as freaks of society were marginalized and ostracized, and how

those working in the tailoring industry became blind from a poor work environment. Thus, the environment and the context of that environment influence the health of the individual. Later in his career Adler became focused on how people were being affected by social unrest, the wars, and the anti-Semitism/ethnic conflict/nationalism in Europe (Hoffman, 1994).

Adler also understood the many cultural differences of Europe as he attempted to deal with problems of misunderstanding between warring nations. Adler contended that so much strife and suffering could be avoided through a sound education. He saw many countries trying to work out their psychological issues, such as feelings of inferiority or insignificance, and lack of attention, through war (Bottome, 1939).

Adlerians espouse a growth model, noting that one's fate is never fixed or predetermined and that individuals are always in the process of "becoming." The Adlerian psychotherapist believes that the person who is experiencing difficulties in living, or "psychopathology," is not sick, but discouraged (Maniaci et al., 2014; Sperry, Carlson, Sauerheber, & Sperry, 2015). The Adlerian psychotherapist also views their clients as capable of using their creativity to choose alternative methods of dealing with life. Psychopathology is understood as based in mistaken notions and faulty assumptions, low social interest, discouragement, and ineffective lifestyle (Sperry et al., 2015). The task of counseling and psychotherapy then becomes one of encouraging the client to develop more social interest and create a more effective lifestyle in order to master the tasks of life.

In practice, Adlerian psychotherapy is a psychoeducational, present/future-oriented, and brief approach (Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2006). Though classic Adlerian psychotherapy, which is akin to long-term psychoanalysis, is still practiced in some circles, this book focuses on a modern and contemporary approach of Adlerian psychotherapy that is consistent with other approaches that are more time-limited. Adlerian ideas and methods have been effectively applied across the full range of settings (e.g., community agencies, schools, business, child guidance centers, hospitals/medical centers, prisons, homes, private practice). The theory has been characterized as "commonsense" or "blue collar," yet it is still not commonly practiced as Adler intended and modeled. While the fundamental principles

of Adlerian psychology have remained the same, new techniques and applications continue to arise, and the theory continues to evolve into the 21st century.

As one will discover when reading other books in the *Theories of Psychotherapy Series*, Adler's original ideas serve as a foundation for most modern theories of counseling and psychotherapy. Most of today's prominent theories of psychotherapy, including person-centered therapy, existential therapy, cognitive therapy, rational emotive behavioral therapy, logotherapy, strategic therapy, constructivist therapy, positive psychology, and family therapy, can find their roots in Adlerian ideas (Carlson et al., 2006; DeRobertis, 2011; Watts, 1998, 2000b, 2012; Watts & Critelli, 1997; Watts & LaGuardia, 2015; Watts & Phillips, 2004). Adlerian theory espouses a philosophy of human relations based upon social equality and emphasizes the influence of contextual factors. Further, as a psychoeducational model, Adlerian ideas can be applied in individual, group, couples, and family counseling as well as in the classroom and at the community level. As such, Adlerian theory is uniquely positioned as a complete and effective approach to meet the expanding needs of diverse clients across multiple settings (Carlson & Englar-Carlson, 2012). We believe that therapists should not ask themselves if they are an Adlerian, but just "how" Adlerian they really are.

This book provides a comprehensive review of modern Adlerian psychotherapy. In the next chapter, we describe the historical tenets of the Adlerian approach as a means of providing the foundation for better understanding of the theory (Chapter 3) and the therapeutic process of Adlerian therapy (Chapter 4). These chapters highlight the process and practice of this approach, including a variety of case examples. The fifth and sixth chapters look at the research support and the future direction of this important approach. Finally, a short summary, appendix, glossary, and suggestions for further study are provided.