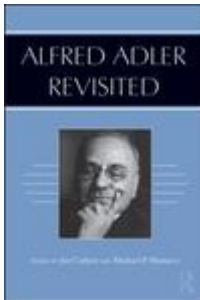


## Catching Up to Alfred Adler: Individual Psychology Reconsidered

A review of



### **Alfred Adler Revisited**

by Jon Carlson and Michael P. Maniacci (Eds.)

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In *Alfred Adler Revisited*, Jon Carlson and Michael Maniacci have not only done an admirable job of bringing together a number of Adler's lesser known works, but they have also supplemented these works with relevant commentaries by a host of well-respected contemporary professionals. The cumulative effect of this volume is that the reader comes to realize the profound depth and range of Adler's thinking, perhaps for the first time.

Adler's attempts to reach an American audience were made difficult by the dominance of behavioral and Freudian thinking in academia and the clinical world, respectively. To make matters worse, his ideas (for example, those concerning superiority) continue to be oversimplified to the point of inaccuracy in college texts (e.g., see Rathus, 2008). On a grand scale, Adler tends to be inaccurately cast as a mere student of Freud.

As a result, individual psychology has not been given the appreciation it deserves in the United States. As Weber (2003) put it, “Adler’s ideas have been borrowed by all sides, yet there is a lack of recognition and sometimes a denial of Adler’s contributions” (p. 246).

One cannot read *Alfred Adler Revisited* without realizing that this text is long overdue. It exposes Adler as an original thinker who was unquestionably ahead of his time. Via Adler’s own words and those of his commentators, the reader is compelled to recognize Adler as a precursor (whether acknowledged or unacknowledged) to orthodox psychoanalysis, third force psychology, positive psychology, social constructionism, evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology, narrative–hermeneutic psychology, systems or systemic theory, postmodern psychology, social-cognitive theory, field theory, and feminist psychology. Moreover, there is a highly phenomenological approach to pedagogy nascent in Adler’s thinking (DeRobertis, 2011). Accordingly, this text would be of interest to academicians, clinicians, and developmental thinkers from a wide variety of backgrounds.

## **The Nonindividualistic Nature of Individual Psychology**

Individual psychology is easily misconstrued as an individualist psychology. The notion of an “individual” psychology stirs up images of rugged individualism, especially when Adler introduced the notion of a striving for “superiority” into his psychology. Accordingly, Maniacci notes straightaway that Adler’s first choices in naming his viewpoint were *holistic* psychology and *personality* psychology, both of which were already in use at the time (p. 4).

The term *individual* was simply another term that Adler felt would emphasize the organized unity of the human being, one that would reflect his prioritizing of the whole organism over isolated parts (e.g., an id or ego). Later in the text, one finds Adler himself (e.g., p. 66) emphasizing over and over again that the notion of a striving for superiority ought to be interpreted as a tendency to actualize one’s fullest potentials, not as a bald advocacy of the will to power.

With the introduction of his notion of social interest (e.g., p. 51), the more mature Adler broke from any position that might be accused of advancing a psychology that revolves around a drive for power for oneself or “personal” superiority. Indeed, Adler specifically noted that a “rigid insistence upon complete superiority” runs contradictory to the inherently social nature of human existence or healthy human striving (p. 150).

Thus, one can only conclude that Hall and Lindzey (1978) were justified in noting, “Adler belongs to the tradition of William James and William Stern, who are said to have laid the foundation for personalistic psychology” (p. 160). In this light, the psychologies of Viktor Frankl (with his emphasis on self-transcendence) and Karen Horney (with her emphasis on the social nature of self-realization) appear less original and more markedly Adlerian.

## Adlerian Pedagogical Thought

One of the more enlightening aspects of *Alfred Adler Revisited* is just how dedicated Adler was to understanding children and their development. A highly empathic pedagogical viewpoint runs through his works. One is struck by the fact that five chapters of the text are specifically developmental in nature.

As part and parcel of his field theoretical view, Adler gave consideration to the child's family constellation and the issue of birth order. This, of course, is well known. What is not well known, however, is that birth order alone meant little to Adler. As he put it, "It is not, of course, the child's number in the order of successive births which influences his character, but the *situation* into which he is born and the way in which he *interprets* it" (p. 74).

By emphasizing the child's interpretation of his or her total situation, Adler proposed a decidedly existential-phenomenological orientation to child development. This orientation is further demonstrated by his insistence that it is in the child's best interest to be raised with an other-centered "sense of community" (p. 122), as existential child developmental theorizing continues to move in this very same direction (e.g., DeRobertis, 2008).

On the whole, Adler showed himself to be quite sensitive to both the point of view of the child and the points of view of those who care for the child (i.e., parents and teachers). On the one hand, Adler observed that the child needs role models who can provide the means through which he or she can overcome feelings of relative inferiority. In this way, Adler is similar to Lev Vygotsky in his thinking on child development, enculturation, and social adaptation (DeRobertis, 2011).

On the other hand, Adler evidenced a striking sensitivity to the difficulties that parents and teachers face in having to be nurturers and disciplinarians. Throughout *Alfred Adler Revisited* one can clearly sense that Adler was deeply concerned with the temptation to overgratify or "pamper" a child. He considered pampering to be a major threat to the well-being of both the child and to civilized society as a whole, since pampering can lead to underdeveloped social interest.

Terry Kottman and Melisa Heston correctly note that contemporary society, fit with "teacup parents" and "helicopter parents," shows Adler's concern to be prophetic (p. 118). Adler, along with humanistic developmentalists like Charlotte Bühler, remains one of the few theorists to take the threat of pampering or "spoiling" seriously (DeRobertis, 2008). It is for this reason that Adler warned of the dangers of rampant Freudian pansexualism, which he considered to be, in essence, a psychology of the pampered child (p. 33).

Although Adler's thinking on pampering ought to have an immediate appeal to contemporary parents, teachers, and child psychologists, his thoughts on geneticism may take considerably more time to gain the recognition they deserve. Humanistically minded pedagogical thinkers and dynamical systems theorists will find Adler's refutation of genetic reductionism quite refreshing. However, both the mainstream of the psychological

community and American culture at large are far too preoccupied with genetic explanations at the current time to begin to appreciate Adler's tripartite self-system of genetic predisposition, environmental situation, and the creative appropriation of life's raw materials.

To be sure, this is regrettable, given the insight that is afforded one in examining a child's development from the point of view of his or her creative meaning-making activity. For instance, Adler's pedagogical perspective teaches us that a "bad" child is a child whose striving toward community feeling has been thwarted, resulting in a misinterpretation of what it means to live in the presence of other people. The so-called "bad child" comes to the conclusion that it is better to be infamous than insignificant.

## Concluding Remarks






As is to be expected, there are times when reading Adler that one will stumble across certain ideas that have been abandoned since the time of his writing. For example, his assertion that "You cannot train a living being for defeat" (p. 15) may seem questionable in the light of modern research on learned helplessness. The contemporary reader will find Adler's characterization of enuresis as a form of defiance somewhat myopic and in need of qualification (p. 136).

More important, however, one walks away from this text with insights that remain relevant today. Through Adler, parents and teachers who pamper children are finally exposed for what they really are: individuals acting on the basis of their own self-interest to the detriment of the child and society at large.

Having settled into a viewpoint that ties personal growth and achievement to social interest, the mature Adler provides a sound theoretical backdrop for the development of genuine learning communities to promote mastery rather than competition in education (Bergin, 1995). Finally, Adler's notion of lifestyle as the creative product of the whole person reminds us, as we anticipate the arrival of the new *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, that diagnostic labels actually hide the very organization that is inherent to an individual's lifestyle.

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