

Roots of Contemporary Cognitive Theories in the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler

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This paper examines attributions to the influence of Alfred Adler by primary theorists from contemporary cognitive and cognitive-behavioral theories of personality and psychotherapy. Although Adler's influence is often not recognized by the mainstream of applied psychologists, a number of leading theorists have acknowledged Adler as a major source of their ideas. Circumstances leading to this discrepancy are examined.

Adherents of Individual Psychology have traced the influence of Alfred Adler's work on many theories of personality and psychotherapy developed subsequent to the era of the so-called "three pillars"—Freud, Adler, and Jung. Despite the identification of many apparent lines of influence from Adler to modern theories, these researchers have documented a widespread lack of understanding of Adlerian contributions to mainstream applied psychology (e.g., Allen, 1971; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; 1979; Mosak, 1989; Sweeney, 1989). That there is little recognition of the Adlerian influence on much of contemporary cognitive theory among the mainstream of psychologists seems clear. But what of the major cognitive theorists, themselves? To what extent have they attributed major ideas to Adler?

The present paper explores what major, non-Adlerian, cognitive theorists have acknowledged regarding the influence of Adler on the development of their ideas. This paper addresses several questions of relevance both to Adlerian theory as a specific case and to the evolution of psychological ideas. Where cognitive theorists have acknowledged Adler's pioneering work as a major source of their ideas, why has this lineage not been recognized by the field

as a whole? Where cognitive theorists have explicitly not credited Adler, despite the presence of obvious Adlerian precursors to their theories, what might account for such omissions?

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ADLERIAN THEORY

Adlerian theory is an integration of cognitive, psychodynamic, and systems perspectives (Sperry, 1993). H.L. Ansbacher, a noted Adlerian scholar, described Individual Psychology as a:

holistic, phenomenological, teleological, field-theoretical, and socially-oriented approach to psychology and related fields. This approach is based upon the assumption of the uniqueness, self consistency, activity, and creativity of the human individual (style of life); an open dynamic system of motivation (striving for a subjectively conceived goal of success); and an innate potentiality for social life (social interest). (Manaster & Corsini, 1982, p. 2)

Adler (1982) affirmed that every individual is characterized by unity across the broad spectrum of personality—cognitions, affect, and behavior. Personality, or *Style of Life*, is a cognitive blueprint of the person's unique and individually created convictions, goals, and personal beliefs. Each individual's style of life, formed in childhood, encompasses the full range of human functioning in the life tasks of work, society, love, spirituality, and self (Mosak, 1989).

The central human directionality is toward competence or self-mastery, what Adler called "striving for superiority." This is the individual's creative and compensatory answer to the normal and universal childhood feelings of insignificance and disempowerment, and the concomitant beliefs that one is less than what one should be, i.e., "feelings of inferiority." Thus superiority is the natural human desire to move from a perceived negative to a perceived positive. Such striving may occur in either a socially useful or a socially useless manner. The manner one chooses constitutes the Adlerian criterion for normality: healthy development follows the goal of social interest or community feeling; maladjustment is the consequence of pursuing narcissistic self-interest (Ansbacher, 1983).

Adler (1935) noted that persons are motivated by subjectively created goals which impact how we perceive life. This subjective perception of life or "schema of apperception" includes the person's view of self, others, and the world. Because of the "creative self," the ability to construct one's own reality, people seek their goals in many ways. In sum, the Adlerian position is cognitive, with a constructivist viewpoint. "Adler's theory emphasizes that the person is an active, creative agent in the construction of his own personality, not merely a passive reactor shaped by his environment" (Shulman, 1985, p. 243).

For Adler, maladaptive core lifestyle convictions (cognitive constructs) are at the heart of maladjustment. Correspondingly, recognition and reconstruction/restructuring of these convictions, in the context of a supportive

therapist-client alliance, are at the heart of therapy. Maladjusted persons show low social interest and high "discouragement." They either have not developed or have lost the "courage" to meet the demands of life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Change occurs through reeducation and the "subject matter of this course in reeducation is the patient—the lifestyle and the relationship to the life tasks" (Mosak, 1989, p. 84). Constructive movement begins when clients recognize their maladaptive lifestyle convictions. This new understanding leads to perceptual reconstruction and the courage to change behavior.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS BY NON-ADLERIANS

A number of non-Adlerian authors have noted, in a general sense, the influence of Adler on contemporary cognitive theories. For example, Sundberg and Tyler (1976), in an introduction to clinical psychology, acknowledged Adler as having pioneered a cognitive approach to psychotherapy. The authors noted that "many present-day psychologists who do not think of themselves as Adlerians are emphasizing the cognitive and social aspects of personality in their theoretical formulations" (p. 77).

Murray and Jacobson (1978), in the *Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change*, explicated the cognitive nature of Adler's approach and credited him with being the forerunner of many modern cognitive therapists such as Albert Ellis, Julian Rotter, George Kelly, Eric Berne, and Aaron Beck (p. 661). According to Werner (1982),

We can say that cognitive therapy really began in Vienna around 1911, when Alfred Adler and Sigmund Freud went their separate ways... Adler seems to have been the original proponent of the cognitive approach by virtue of his contention that each person's behavior was shaped by his notions of what constituted success and by the goals he set up to achieve it. (pp. 13-14)

Finally, Victor Raimy, developer of the Misconception Hypothesis in cognitive therapy, heartily acknowledged Adler as the first phenomenological, cognitive theorist and therapist in the modern era (Raimy, 1975, 1985). Raimy (1975) stated that his Misconception Hypothesis, in agreement with other contemporary cognitively oriented approaches, "proposes that successful psychological treatment occurs when faulty ideas or beliefs are modified or eliminated; ideas, beliefs, or conceptions are assumed to control maladjusted as well adjusted behavior" (p. 4). He further suggested that Adler's notion of maladjustment is the essential forerunner of current cognitive therapies, "for Adler viewed neurotic behavior as controlled by mistaken opinions" (p. 114).

PRIMARY SOURCE ATTRIBUTIONS

It is apparent that Adler's influence on contemporary cognitive approaches to counseling and psychotherapy has been recognized by some non-Adlerians. In addition, the observation has been made that "contemporary cognitive-behavioral

therapy looks much like Adlerian therapy” (Corey, 1991, p. 164; see also Dowd & Kelly, 1980). One might expect to find the influence of Adler explicitly acknowledged and clearly delineated by the creators of current cognitively oriented approaches to therapy. As described below, this has been the case for theorists subscribing to Rational-Emotive and Cognitive Therapy perspectives, but not for theorists espousing Cognitive-Constructivistic or Social-Cognitive theoretical positions.

Rational-Emotive Therapy

Albert Ellis (1989), founder of Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET), cited Adler as the foundational modern-era precursor to RET, stating that “Alfred Adler, more than even Freud, is probably the true father of modern psychotherapy” (Ellis, 1970, p. 11). As Dryden and Ellis (1987) elaborated,

The work of Adler was important to the development of RET in several respects. Adler was the first great therapist to really emphasize inferiority feelings — while RET similarly stresses self-rating and the ego anxiety to which it leads. Like Adler and his Individual Psychology, RET also emphasizes people’s goals, purposes, values, and meanings. RET also follows Adler in regard to the use of active-directive teaching, the stress placed on social interest, the use of a holistic and humanistic outlook, and the employment of highly cognitive-persuasive forms of psychological treatment. (pp. 130)

Ellis (1973) noted that “it is highly probable that without (Adler’s) pioneering work, the main elements of rational-emotive therapy might never have been developed” (p. 112).

Cognitive Therapy

Aaron Beck, the developer of Cognitive Therapy, cited Adler as the earliest of the *attitudinal* therapists who “focus on the person’s ideas—his introspections, his observation of himself, his plans for solving problems” (Beck, 1976, p. 22). In noting that Adler was the first conscious, phenomenologically-oriented approach to therapy in the modern era, Beck stated:

Alfred Adler’s Individual Psychology emphasized the importance of understanding the patient within the framework of his own conscious experiences. For Adler, therapy consisted of attempting to unravel how the person perceived and experienced the world. (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979, pp. 8-9)

Freeman (1981), a non-Adlerian and a colleague of Beck, cited Adler as “the earliest of the cognitive therapists” (p. 228) and noted that Beck and Ellis “credit their training in Adlerian and Horneyan models as central to their formation of a cognitive model of psychotherapy” (Freeman, 1983, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, Freeman (1993) noted that the lack of attention paid to Adler’s theory in clinical and counseling psychology programs is

incredible, given the Adlerian contributions to the development of psychotherapeutic theory, clinical practice, and delivery of psychological services...(Individual Psychology) has been the basis for Frankl’s Logotherapy and the contemporary

Ego-analytic approaches of the psychoanalysts, and has been one of the major influences for the development of present day Cognitive Behavior Therapy...The structured, strategic, systemic, and dynamic focus that was developed by Adler...has become so much a part of Cognitive Therapy. (pp. iv-v)

Cognitive Constructivistic Theorists

Adler’s Individual Psychology emphasizes that humans are creative agents in the construction of their own personalities (Shulman, 1985). As noted by Master (1991), Adlerian theory’s integration of cognitive, psychodynamic, and systemic perspectives looks remarkably similar to contemporary cognitive constructivism. Nevertheless, in reviewing a range of works by theorists and practitioners espousing a constructivistic approach (Bannister, 1977; Guidano, 1983, 1988, 1991; Guidano & Liotti, 1983; Joyce-Moniz, 1985; Kelly, 1955; Liotti, 1987, 1993; Lyddon, 1995; Mahoney, 1974, 1984, 1985, 1988a, 1988b, 1989, 1991, 1995; Neimeyer, 1987, 1993; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995; Sechrest, 1983), only cursory mention of Adler was found.

Kelly (1955) made a brief mention of the similitude between his “superordinate constructs” and Adler’s “style of life” (p. 88). Similarly, Guidano and Liotti (1983) remarked that their description of the individual’s “knowledge organization” is reminiscent of Adler’s concept of “life style” (p. 142). Despite mentioning the similarity between their ideas and a cardinal tenet of Adlerian psychology, neither Kelly or Guidano and Liotti offered any further elaboration.

Mahoney (1984, 1988a) noted the cognitive and constructivistic nature of Adler’s theory.

Few psychologists would challenge the notion that humans develop individually patterned life-styles...but many would hesitate to embrace the concept of *lifestyle* as it was originally intended by Alfred Adler. Drawing on his familiarity with Vaihinger’s philosophy of fictions, Adler viewed the lifestyle as an abstract organizing principle or construct that formatively influenced the contents and process of experience. (1988a, p. 7)

In subsequent writings he stated that Adler and Kelly were both strongly influenced by the neo-Kantian philosopher Hans Vaihinger in the development of their cognitive constructivistic approaches (Mahoney, 1989, 1991). No further mention of Adler was offered, however, and Mahoney described Kelly as the essential pioneer of cognitive constructivistic personality theory and psychotherapy.

Social-Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura (1986, 1989), the developer of Social-Cognitive Theory, recently introduced the notion of “human agency” into his theory, including concepts such as creativity, proactive cognitions, self-control, freedom, and choice, in a manner highly reminiscent of Adler’s theory of the creative self.

Nevertheless, Bandura (1995) made only one cursory citation of Adler's work in the several major works examined (1977, 1985, 1986, 1989, 1995).

In sum, several of the major cognitive theorists have acknowledged a heritage in the pioneering work of Adler, while others, by omission, have suggested that they were not influenced by Adler at all.

THE "LACK OF RECOGNITION" QUESTION

"Adler once proclaimed that he was more concerned that his theories survived than that people remembered to associate his theories with his name. His wish was apparently granted" (Mosak, 1989, p. 69). In terms of cognitive constructivistic and social-cognitive theories of personality and psychotherapy, Mosak's point appears to be accurate. The question naturally arises, why has Adler not been more widely recognized by cognitive theorists and practitioners? Two responses have been proposed.

First is the response of "wide-spread plagiarism" made by non-Adlerian theorist and psychological historian Henri Ellenberger (1970). In addressing the influence of Adler on contemporary psychological theory and practice, Ellenberger stated:

It would not be easy to find another author from which so much has been borrowed from all sides without acknowledgement than Alfred Adler... There is the puzzling phenomenon of a collective denial of Adler's work and the systematic attribution of anything coined by him to other authors... His teaching has become, to use a French idiom, an "open quarry" (une carrière publique), that is, a place where anyone and all may come and draw anything without compunction. An author will meticulously quote the source of any sentence he takes from elsewhere, but it does not occur to him to do the same whenever the source is Individual Psychology; it is as if nothing original could ever come from Adler. (p. 645)

The second response, preferred by the current authors, may be called the "zeitgeist effect." Sahakain (1970), a non-Adlerian, stated:

The psychology of Alfred Adler was ahead of its time, and, despite the popularity it enjoyed, the psychological community has yet to feel the full impact of its significance... profundity and originality. (p. 15)

The psychological mindset of Adler's time (early 20th century) was primarily mechanistic. Consequently, Adler's movement to a phenomenological, nondeterministic theory was generally considered unscientific and unworthy of note by Freudians and behaviorists, who dominated the field for most of the 20th century. Many of the creators of contemporary cognitive approaches, therefore, may not have attended to the pioneering cognitive work of Adler (Ellis & Greiger, 1977; Freeman, 1993).

Furthermore, many "secondary source" textbooks have provided inadequate and erroneous presentations of Individual Psychology (Silverman & Corsini, 1986). For example, Adler's theory often has been erroneously described as "neo-Freudian" and placed alongside discussions of other psychoanalytic theories (e.g., Hansen, Rossberg, & Cramer, 1994). While it is true

that neo-Freudians have been strongly influenced by Adler (Ellenberger, 1970), it is not true that Individual Psychology was merely the first neo-Freudian position.

When Maslow introduced his "third force," subsequently named "humanistic psychology," he listed Adlerians first among the groups included and the *Journal of Individual Psychology* among the five journals where these groups are most likely to publish. He also invited H.L. Ansbacher, as representing Adlerian psychology, to become a founding sponsor of the Association for Humanistic Psychology and member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. (Ansbacher, 1990, p. 46)

With the recent epistemological shift in psychology toward a phenomenological, constructivistic perspective, it is not surprising to find that many ideas originally presented in Individual Psychology have "reappeared" in contemporary cognitive approaches, albeit with different nomenclature and without reference to Adler. Thus, it seems likely that a number of theorists have inadvertently failed to recognize Adler and Individual Psychology because of a dominant, mechanistic zeitgeist, with which Adler was dramatically out of phase, and a resulting insufficient background and understanding of Adler's pioneering work.

At the same time, adherents of the Adlerian school are not without responsibility for this historical omission. As Freeman (1993) noted, presentations of the theory and clinical practice of Individual Psychology have often been written by Adlerians for Adlerians. They have not brought their message to the broader forums of psychology.

In conclusion, Adlerian roots of modern cognitive theories have been clearly acknowledged by some cognitively oriented theorists but this Adlerian heritage has not been recognized by many mainstream professionals who work within the cognitive tradition. When a theory is out of step with the dominant metaphors of its time, its constructs and methods may, inevitably, be undervalued, even as its useful features are assimilated into the emerging positions of a later day. When the dominant metaphor changes, however, then it may be time for a new look into the past.

Certainly, this is not to claim Adler as the only forerunner of cognitive theory or to deny that later theorists made their own unique contributions to the field. In light of this heritage, however, it may prove fruitful for the further development of cognitive theories and therapies for professionals to get a clearer picture of where they come from and examine a system of thought that has been here before. To loosely paraphrase a bit of pithy wisdom, "Of what use are giants if we refuse to stand on their shoulders?"

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