The goal of the human soul is conquest, perfection, security, superiority. Every child is faced with so many obstacles in life that no child ever grows up without striving for some form of significance.

—ALFRED ADLER

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Alfred Adler fashioned an image of human nature that did not depict people as victimized by instincts and conflict and doomed by biological forces and childhood experiences. He called his approach *individual psychology* because it focused on the uniqueness of each person and denied the universality of biological motives and goals ascribed to us by Sigmund Freud.

In Adler’s opinion, each individual is primarily a social being. Our personalities are shaped by our unique social environments and interactions, not by our efforts to satisfy biological needs. Although sex was of primary importance to Freud as a determining factor in personality, Adler minimized the role of sex in his system. To Adler, the conscious, not the unconscious, was at the core of personality. Rather than being driven by forces we cannot see and control, we are actively involved in creating our selves and directing our future.

With Adler and Freud, we see two vastly different theories created by two men brought up in the same city in the same era and educated as physicians at the same university. There was only a 14-year difference in their ages. And as with Freud, aspects of Adler’s childhood may have influenced his way of looking at human nature.

### The Life of Adler (1870–1937)

#### Childhood and Adolescence

Adler’s early childhood was marked by illness, an awareness of death, and jealousy of his older brother. He suffered from rickets (a vitamin D deficiency characterized by softening of the bones), which kept him from playing with other children. At the age of 3, his younger brother died in the bed next to his. At 4, Adler himself was close to death from pneumonia. When he heard the doctor tell his father, “Your boy is lost,” he decided to become a doctor (Orgler, 1963, p. 16).

Pampered by his mother because of his sickness, the young Adler was de-throned at the age of 2 by the arrival of another baby. Biographers have suggested that Adler’s mother may then have rejected him, but he was clearly his father’s favorite. Therefore, his childhood relations with his parents were different from Freud’s. (Freud was closer to his mother than to his father.) As an adult, Adler discarded the Freudian concept of the Oedipus complex because it was so foreign to his childhood experiences.

Adler was jealous of his older brother, who was vigorous and healthy and could engage in the physical activities and sports in which Alfred could not take part. “I remember sitting on a bench, bandaged up on account of rickets, with my healthy elder brother sitting opposite me. He could run, jump, and move about quite effortlessly, while for me, movement of any sort was a strain and an effort” (Adler quoted in Bottome, 1939, pp. 30–31).

Adler felt inferior to this brother and to other neighborhood children, who all seemed healthier and more athletic. As a result, he resolved to work hard to overcome his feelings of inferiority and to compensate for his physical limitations. Despite his small stature, clumsiness, and unattractiveness, the legacies of his illness, he forced himself to join in games and sports. Gradually he won his victory
and achieved a sense of self-esteem and social acceptance. He developed a fondness for the company of other people and retained this sociability all his life. In his personality theory, Adler emphasized the importance of the peer group and suggested that childhood relationships with siblings and with children outside the family were much more significant than Freud believed.

In school (the same school Freud had attended), Adler was initially unhappy and was only a mediocre student. Believing the boy unfit for anything else, a teacher advised Adler’s father to apprentice him to a shoemaker, a prospect Adler found frightening. He was particularly bad in mathematics, but he persisted and eventually rose from being a failing student to the top of his class.

In many ways, the story of Adler’s childhood reads like a tragedy, but it is also a textbook example of his personality theory, of overcoming childhood weakness and inferiority to shape his destiny. The theorist who would give the world the notion of inferiority feelings spoke from the depths of his own childhood. “Those who are familiar with my life work will clearly see the accord existing between the facts of my childhood and the views I expressed” (quoted in Bottome, 1939, p. 9).

**Adulthood**

Fulfilling his childhood ambition, Adler studied medicine at the University of Vienna but graduated with no better than a mediocre academic record. He entered private practice as an ophthalmologist but soon shifted to general medicine. He was interested in incurable diseases but became so distressed at his helplessness to prevent death, particularly in younger patients, that he chose to specialize in neurology and psychiatry.

Adler’s 9-year association with Freud began in 1902, when Freud invited Adler and three others to meet once a week at Freud’s home to discuss psychoanalysis. Although their relationship never became close, Freud initially thought highly of Adler and praised his skill as a physician who was able to gain the trust of his patients. It is important to remember that Adler was never a student or disciple of Freud’s and was not psychoanalyzed by him. One of Freud’s colleagues charged that Adler did not have the ability to probe the unconscious mind and psychoanalyze people. It is interesting to speculate on whether this supposed lack led Adler to base his personality theory on the more easily accessible consciousness and to minimize the role of the unconscious.

By 1910, although Adler was president of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society and co-editor of its journal, he was also an increasingly vocal critic of Freudian theory. He soon severed all connection with psychoanalysis and went on to develop his own approach to personality. Freud reacted angrily to Adler’s defection. He belittled Adler’s physical stature (Adler was five inches shorter than Freud) and called Adler loathsome, abnormal, driven mad by ambition, filled with venom and meanness, paranoid, intensely jealous, and sadistic. He described Adler’s theory as worthless (Fiebert, 1997; Gay, 1988; Wittels, 1924).

Adler showed similar hostility toward Freud, calling him a swindler and denouncing psychoanalysis as filth (Roazen, 1975). Adler became irate whenever he was introduced or referred to as a student of Freud’s. In his later years Adler appeared as
embittered toward defectors from his own approach as Freud had toward those, like Adler, who deviated from psychoanalysis. Adler was known to “flare suddenly into heated anger when he felt his authority challenged” (Hoffman, 1994, p. 148).

In 1912, Adler founded the Society for Individual Psychology. He served in the Austrian army during World War I (1914–1918) and later organized government sponsored child-counseling clinics in Vienna. In his clinics, Adler introduced group training and guidance procedures, forerunners of modern group therapy techniques. In 1926, he made the first of several visits to the United States, where he taught and gave popular lecture tours.

He moved to the United States in 1929, settling in New York City, where he continued his work to develop and promote his individual psychology. A biographer noted that Adler’s “personal traits of geniality, optimism, and warmth coupled with an intensely ambitious drive . . . soon catapulted him to American prominence as a psychological expert” (Hoffman, 1994, p. 160).

Adler’s books and lectures brought him recognition on a national scale, and he became America’s first popular psychologist, a celebrity of the day. In 1937, while on an exhausting 56-lecture tour of Europe, Adler suffered a heart attack and died in Scotland.

### Log On

**Classical Adlerian Psychology**

The Alfred Adler Institute of San Francisco offers a comprehensive file of writings, videos, film clips, and recordings of everything you might want to know about Adler.

**Personality Theories: Alfred Adler**

An overview of Adler’s life and work.

For direct links to these sites, log on to the student companion site for this book at [http://www.academic.cengage.com/psychology/Schultz](http://www.academic.cengage.com/psychology/Schultz) and choose Chapter 3.

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**Inferiority Feelings: The Source of Human Striving**

- **Inferiority feelings**: The normal condition of all people; the source of all human striving.

- **Compensation**: A motivation to overcome inferiority, to strive for higher levels of development.

Adler believed that inferiority feelings are always present as a motivating force in behavior. “To be a human being means to feel oneself inferior,” Adler wrote (1933/1939, p. 96). Because this condition is common to all of us, then, it is not a sign of weakness or abnormality.

Adler proposed that inferiority feelings are the source of all human striving. Individual growth results from compensation, from our attempts to overcome our real or imagined inferiorities. Throughout our lives, we are driven by the need to overcome this sense of inferiority and to strive for increasingly higher levels of development.
The process begins in infancy. Infants are small and helpless and are totally dependent on adults. Adler believed that the infant is aware of his or her parents’ greater power and strength and of the hopelessness of trying to resist or challenge that power. As a result, the infant develops feelings of inferiority relative to the larger, stronger people around him or her.

Although this initial experience of inferiority applies to everyone in infancy, it is not genetically determined. Rather, it is a function of the environment, which is the same for all infants—an environment of helplessness and dependency on adults. Thus, inferiority feelings are inescapable, but more important, they are necessary because they provide the motivation to strive and grow.

The Inferiority Complex

Suppose a child does not grow and develop. What happens when the child is unable to compensate for his or her feelings of inferiority? An inability to overcome inferiority feelings intensifies them, leading to the development of an inferiority complex. People with an inferiority complex have a poor opinion of themselves and feel helpless and unable to cope with the demands of life. Adler found such a complex in the childhood of many adults who came to him for treatment.

An inferiority complex can arise from three sources in childhood: organic inferiority, spoiling, and neglect. The investigation of organic inferiority, Adler’s
first major research effort, was carried out while he was still associated with Freud, who approved of the notion. Adler concluded that defective parts or organs of the body shape personality through the person’s efforts to compensate for the defect or weakness, just as Adler had compensated for rickets, the physical inferiority of his childhood years. For instance, a child who is physically weak might focus on that weakness and work to develop superior athletic ability.

History records many examples of such compensation: In ancient times the Greek statesman Demosthenes overcame a stutter to become a great orator. The sickly Theodore Roosevelt, 26th president of the United States, became a model of physical fitness as an adult. Efforts to overcome organic inferiority can result in striking artistic, athletic, and social accomplishments, but if these efforts fail, they can lead to an inferiority complex.

Adler’s work is another example of a conception of personality developed along intuitive lines, drawn from the theorist’s personal experience, and later confirmed by data from patients. Adler’s office in Vienna was near an amusement park, and his patients included circus performers and gymnasts. They possessed extraordinary physical skills that, in many cases, were developed as a result of hard work to overcome childhood disabilities.

Spoiling or pampering a child can also bring about an inferiority complex. Spoiled children are the center of attention in the home. Their every need or whim is satisfied, and little is denied them. Under the circumstances, these children naturally develop the idea that they are the most important persons in any situation and that other people should always defer to them. The first experience at school, where these children are no longer the focus of attention, comes as a shock for which they are unprepared. Spoiled children have little social feeling and are impatient with others. They have never learned to wait for what they want, nor have they learned to overcome difficulties or adjust to others’ needs. When confronted with obstacles to gratification, spoiled children come to believe that they must have some personal deficiency that is thwarting them; hence, an inferiority complex develops.

It is easy to understand how neglected, unwanted, and rejected children can develop an inferiority complex. Their infancy and childhood are characterized by a lack of love and security because their parents are indifferent or hostile. As a result, these children develop feelings of worthlessness, or even anger, and view others with distrust.

**The Superiority Complex**

Whatever the source of the complex, a person may tend to overcompensate and so develop what Adler called a *superiority complex*. This involves an exaggerated opinion of one’s abilities and accomplishments. Such a person may feel inwardly self-satisfied and superior and show no need to demonstrate his or her superiority with accomplishments. Or the person may feel such a need and work to become extremely successful. In both cases, persons with a superiority complex are given to boasting, vanity, self-centeredness, and a tendency to denigrate others.
**Striving for Superiority, or Perfection**

Inferiority feelings are the source of motivation and striving, but to what end? Are we motivated simply to be rid of inferiority feelings? Adler believed that we work for something more; however, his view of our ultimate goal in life changed over the years.

At first, he identified inferiority with a general feeling of weakness or of femininity, in recognition of the inferior standing of women in the society of his day. He spoke of compensation for this feeling as the masculine protest. The goal of the compensation was a will or a drive toward power in which aggression, a supposedly masculine characteristic, played a large part. Later he rejected the idea of equating inferiority feelings with femininity and developed a broader viewpoint in which we strive for superiority, or perfection.

Adler described his notion of **striving for superiority** as the fundamental fact of life (Adler, 1930). Superiority is the ultimate goal toward which we strive. He did not mean superiority in the usual sense of the word, nor did the concept relate to the superiority complex. Striving for superiority is not an attempt to be better than everyone else, nor is it an arrogant or domineering tendency or an inflated opinion of our abilities and accomplishments. What Adler meant was a drive for perfection. The word **perfection** is derived from a Latin word meaning to complete or to finish. Thus, Adler suggested that we strive for superiority in an effort to perfect ourselves, to make ourselves complete or whole.

This innate goal, the drive toward wholeness or completion, is oriented toward the future. Whereas Freud proposed that human behavior is determined by the past (that is, by the instincts and by our childhood experiences), Adler saw human motivation in terms of expectations for the future. He argued that instincts and primal impulses were insufficient as explanatory principles. Only the ultimate goal of superiority or perfection could explain personality and behavior.

**Fictional Finalism**

Adler applied the term **finalism** to the idea that we have an ultimate goal, a final state of being, and a need to move toward it. The goals for which we strive, however, are potentialities, not actualities. In other words, we strive for ideals that exist in us subjectively. Adler believed that our goals are fictional or imagined ideals that cannot be tested against reality. We live our lives around ideals such as the belief that all people are created equal or that all people are basically good. Adler’s life goal was to conquer death; his way of striving for that goal was to become a physician (Hoffman, 1994).

These beliefs influence the ways we perceive and interact with other people. For example, if we believe that behaving a certain way will bring us rewards in a heaven or an afterlife, we will try to act according to that belief. Belief in the existence of an afterlife is not based on objective reality, but it is real to the person who holds that view.

Adler formalized this concept as **fictional finalism**, the notion that fictional ideas guide our behavior as we strive toward a complete or whole state.
of being. We direct the course of our lives by many such fictions, but the most pervasive one is the ideal of perfection. He suggested that the best formulation of this ideal developed by human beings so far is the concept of God. Adler preferred the terms “subjective final goal” or “guiding self-ideal” to describe this concept, but it continues to be known as “fictional finalism” (Watts & Holden, 1994).

There are two additional points about striving for superiority. First, it increases rather than reduces tension. Unlike Freud, Adler did not believe that our sole motivation was to reduce tension. Striving for perfection requires great expenditures of energy and effort, a condition quite different from equilibrium or a tension-free state. Second, the striving for superiority is manifested both by the individual and by society. Most of us are social beings. We strive for superiority or perfection not only as individuals but also as members of a group. We try to achieve the perfection of our culture. In Adler’s view, individuals and society are interrelated and interdependent. People must function constructively with others for the good of all.

Thus, to Adler, human beings perpetually strive for the fictional, ideal goal of perfection. How in our daily lives do we try to attain this goal? Adler answered this question with his concept of the style of life.

The Style of Life

The ultimate goal for each of us is superiority or perfection, but we try to attain that goal through many different behavior patterns. Each of us expresses the striving differently. We develop a unique pattern of characteristics, behaviors, and habits, which Adler called a distinctive character, or style of life.

To understand how the style of life develops, we return to the concepts of inferiority feelings and compensation. Infants are afflicted with inferiority feelings that motivate them to compensate for helplessness and dependency. In these attempts at compensation, children acquire a set of behaviors. For example, the sickly child may strive to increase physical prowess by running or lifting weights. These behaviors become part of the style of life, a pattern of behaviors designed to compensate for inferiority.

Everything we do is shaped and defined by our unique style of life. It determines which aspects of our environment we attend to or ignore and what attitudes we hold. The style of life is learned from social interactions that occur in the early years of life. Adler suggested that the style of life is so firmly crystallized by the age of 4 or 5 that it is difficult to change thereafter.

The style of life becomes the guiding framework for all later behaviors. As we noted, its nature depends on social interactions, especially the person’s order of birth within the family and the nature of the parent–child relationship. Recall that one condition that can lead to an inferiority complex is neglect. Neglected children may feel inferior in coping with the demands of life and therefore may become distrustful and hostile toward others. As a result, their style of life may involve seeking revenge, resenting others’ success, and taking whatever they feel is their due.
The Creative Power of the Self

You may have spotted an apparent inconsistency between Adler’s notion of style of life and our earlier observation that his theory is less deterministic than Freud’s. Adler said we are in control of our fate, not victims of it. But now we find that the style of life is determined by social relationships in the early years and subject to little change after that. This seems almost as deterministic as the Freudian view, which emphasized the importance of early childhood in the formation of the adult personality. However, Adler’s theory is not as deterministic as it may seem at first. He resolved the dilemma by proposing a concept he described as the creative power of the self.

Adler believed that the individual creates the style of life. We create our selves, our personality, our character; these are all terms Adler used interchangeably with style of life. We are not passively shaped by childhood experiences. Those experiences themselves are not as important as our conscious attitude toward them. Adler argued that neither heredity nor environment provides a complete explanation for personality development. Instead, the way we interpret these influences forms the basis for the creative construction of our attitude toward life.

Adler argued for the existence of individual free will that allows each of us to create an appropriate style of life from the abilities and experiences given us by both our genetic endowment and our social environment. Although unclear on specifics, Adler insisted that our style of life is not determined for us; we are free to choose and create it ourselves. Once created, however, the style of life remains constant throughout life.

Dominant, Getting, Avoiding, and Socially Useful Styles

Adler described several universal problems and grouped them in three categories:

1. Problems involving our behavior toward others
2. Problems of occupation
3. Problems of love

He proposed four basic styles of life for dealing with these problems:

1. The dominant type
2. The getting type
3. The avoiding type
4. The socially useful type

The first type displays a dominant or ruling attitude with little social awareness. Such a person behaves without regard for others. The more extreme of this type attack others and become sadists, delinquents, or sociopaths. The less virulent become alcoholics, drug addicts, or suicides; they believe they hurt others by attacking themselves.

The getting type (to Adler, the most common human type) expects to receive satisfaction from other people and so becomes dependent on them.

The avoiding type makes no attempt to face life’s problems. By avoiding difficulties, the person avoids any possibility of failure.
These three types are not prepared to cope with the problems of everyday life. They are unable to cooperate with other people and the clash between their style of life and the real world results in abnormal behavior, which is manifested in neuroses and psychoses. They lack what Adler came to call social interest.

The socially useful type cooperates with others and acts in accordance with their needs. Such persons cope with problems within a well-developed framework of social interest.

Adler was generally opposed to rigidly classifying or typing people in this way, stating that he proposed these four styles of life solely for teaching purposes. He cautioned therapists to avoid the mistake of assigning people to mutually exclusive categories.

**Social Interest**

Adler believed that getting along with others is the first task we encounter in life. Our subsequent level of social adjustment, which is part of our style of life, influences our approach to all of life’s problems. He proposed the concept of **social interest**, which he defined as the individual’s innate potential to cooperate with other people to achieve personal and societal goals. Adler’s term for this concept in the original German, *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, is best translated as “community feeling” (Stepansky, 1983, p. xiii). However, **social interest** has become the accepted term in English.

Although we are influenced more strongly by social than biological forces, in Adler’s view, the potential for social interest is innate. In that limited sense, then, Adler’s approach has a biological element. However, the extent to which our innate potential for social interest is realized depends on our early social experiences.

No one can avoid entirely other people or obligations toward them. From earliest times, people have congregated in families, tribes, and nations. Communities are indispensable to human beings for protection and survival. Thus, it has always been necessary for people to cooperate, to express their social interest. The individual must cooperate with and contribute to society to realize personal and communal goals.

The newborn is in a situation that requires cooperation, initially from the mother or primary caregiver, then from other family members and people at day care or school. Adler noted the importance of the mother as the first person with whom the baby comes in contact. Through her behavior toward the child, the mother can either foster social interest or thwart its development.

Adler believed the mother’s role was vital in developing the child’s social interest as well as other aspects of the personality. He wrote:

>This connection [between mother and child] is so intimate and far reaching that we are never able in later years to point to any characteristic as the effect of heredity. Every tendency which might be inherited has been adapted, trained, educated and made over again by the mother. Her skill or lack of skill will influence all the child’s potentiality. (Adler quoted in Grey, 1998, p. 71)

The mother must teach the child cooperation, companionship, and courage. Only if children feel kinship with others can they act with courage in attempting to cope with life’s demands. Children (and later, adults) who look upon others with
suspicion and hostility will approach life with the same attitude. Those who have no feeling of social interest may become neurotics or even criminals. Adler noted that evils ranging from war to racial hatred to public drunkenness stemmed from a lack of community feeling.

It is interesting to note that early in his career, Adler suggested that people were driven by a lust for power and a need to dominate. He proposed this idea at the time he was struggling to establish his own point of view within the Freudian circle. After he broke with Freud and achieved recognition for his own work, he proposed that people are motivated more by social interest than by the needs for power and dominance.

When Adler was part of Freud’s group, he was considered cantankerous and ambitious, quarreling over the priority of his ideas. But in later years, he mellowed and his system also changed, from emphasizing power and dominance as motivating forces to stressing the more benign force of social or community interest. (Here we see another example of how Adler’s theory reflected his own life experiences.)

**Birth Order**

One of Adler’s most enduring contributions is the idea that order of birth is a major social influence in childhood, one from which we create our style of life. Even though siblings have the same parents and live in the same house, they do not have identical social environments. Being older or younger than one’s siblings and being exposed to differing parental attitudes create different childhood conditions that help determine personality. Adler liked to amaze lecture audiences and dinner guests by guessing a person’s order of birth on the basis of his or her behavior. He wrote about four situations: the first-born child, the second-born child, the youngest child, and the only child.

**The First-Born Child**

At least for a while, first-born children are in a unique and enviable situation. Usually the parents are happy at the birth of the first child and devote considerable time and attention to the new baby. First-borns typically receive their parents’ instant and undivided attention. As a result, first-borns have a happy, secure existence—until the second-born child appears.

Suddenly, no longer the focus of attention, no longer receiving constant love and care, first-borns are, in a sense, dethroned. The affection first-borns received during their reign must now be shared. They must often submit to the outrage of waiting until after the newborn’s needs have been met, and they are admonished to be quiet so as not to disturb the new baby.

No one could expect first-borns to suffer this drastic displacement without putting up a fight. They will try to recapture their former position of power and privilege. The first-born’s battle to regain supremacy in the family is lost from the beginning, however. Things will never be the same, no matter how hard the first-born tries.
For a time, first-borns may become stubborn, ill behaved, and destructive and may refuse to eat or go to bed. They are striking out in anger, but the parents will probably strike back, and their weapons are far more powerful. When first-borns are punished for their troublesome behavior, they may interpret the punishment as additional evidence of their fall and may come to hate the second child, who is, after all, the cause of the problem.

Adler believed all first-borns feel the shock of their changed status in the family, but those who have been excessively pampered feel a greater loss. Also, the extent of the loss depends on the first-born’s age at the time the rival appears. In general, the older a first-born child is when the second child arrives, the less dethronement the first-born will experience. For example, an 8-year-old will be less upset by the birth of a sibling than will a 2-year-old.

Adler found that first-borns are often oriented toward the past, locked in nostalgia and pessimistic about the future. Having learned the advantages of power at one time, they remain concerned with it throughout life. They can exercise some power over younger siblings, but at the same time they are more subject to the power of their parents because more is expected of them.

There are advantages to being the first-born child, however. As the children age, the first-born often plays the role of teacher, tutor, leader, and disciplinarian, expected by parents to help care for younger siblings. These experiences often enable the first-born to mature intellectually to a higher degree than the younger children. One researcher described the situation as follows:

Second-born children might ask older siblings about the meanings of words, about how some things work and why, about the whereabouts of candy or of a parent who is late in coming back home, and about countless other matters that older siblings must now explain. . . . In
this role of tutor, first-born children gain an intellectual advantage. By virtue of rehearsal, by
virtue of having to articulate an explanation or offer the meaning of a word, firstborns gain
more verbal fluency more quickly than the second-borns. (Zajonc, 2001, p. 491)

Adler believed that first-borns also take an unusual interest in maintaining
order and authority. They become good organizers, conscientious and scrupulous
about detail, authoritarian and conservative in attitude. Sigmund Freud was a first-
born; Adler described him as a typical eldest son. First-borns may also grow up to
feel insecure and hostile toward others. Adler believed that neurotics, perverts, and
criminals were often first-borns.

The Second-Born Child
Second-born children, the ones who caused such upheaval in the lives of first-borns, are
also in a unique situation. They never experience the powerful position once occupied
by the first-borns. Even if another child is brought into the family, second-borns do not
suffer the sense of dethronement felt by the first-borns. Furthermore, by this time the
parents have usually changed their child-rearing attitudes and practices. A second baby
is not the novelty the first was; parents may be less concerned and anxious about their
own behavior and may take a more relaxed approach to the second child.

From the beginning, second-borns have a pacesetter in the older sibling. The
second child always has the example of the older child’s behavior as a model, a
threat, or a source of competition. Adler was a second-born child who had a lifelong
competitive relationship with his older brother (whose name was Sigmund). Even
when Adler became a famous analyst, he still felt overshadowed by his brother.

Alfred [Adler] always felt eclipsed by his “model brother” and resented his favored sta-
tus in the family. . . . Even in middle age, he would feel moved to comment wearily that
wealthy businessman Sigmund, “a good industrious fellow [who] was always ahead of
me—is still ahead of me!” (Hoffman, 1994, p. 11)

Competition with the first-born may serve to motivate the second-born, who
may strive to catch up to and surpass the older sibling, a goal that spurs language
and motor development in the second-born. Not having experienced power, second-
borns are not as concerned with it. They are more optimistic about the future and are
likely to be competitive and ambitious, as Adler was.

Other less beneficial outcomes may arise from the relationship between first-
borns and second-borns. If, for example, the older sibling excels in sports or schol-
arship, the second-born may feel that he or she can never surpass the first-born and
may give up trying. In this case, competitiveness would not become part of the
second-born’s style of life, and he or she may become an underachiever, performing
below his or her abilities in many facets of life.

The Youngest Child
Youngest or last-born children never face the shock of dethronement by another
child and often become the pet of the family, particularly if the siblings are more
than a few years older. Driven by the need to surpass older siblings, youngest
children often develop at a remarkably fast rate. Last-borns are often high achievers in whatever work they undertake as adults.

The opposite can occur, however, if the youngest children are excessively pampered and come to believe they needn’t learn to do anything for themselves. As they grow older, such children may retain the helplessness and dependency of childhood. Unaccustomed to striving and struggling, used to being cared for, these people find it difficult to adjust to adulthood.

**The Only Child**

Only children never lose the position of primacy and power they hold in the family; they remain the focus and center of attention. Spending more time in the company of adults than a child with siblings, only children often mature early and manifest adult behaviors and attitudes.

Only children are likely to experience difficulties when they find that in areas of life outside the home, such as school, they are not the center of attention. Only children have learned neither to share nor to compete. If their abilities do not bring them sufficient recognition and attention, they are likely to feel keenly disappointed.

With his ideas about order of birth, Adler was not proposing firm rules of childhood development. A child will not automatically acquire a particular kind of character based solely on his or her position in the family. What Adler was suggesting was the likelihood that certain styles of life will develop as a function of order of birth combined with one’s early social interactions. The creative self in constructing the style of life uses both influences.

**Questions About Human Nature**

Adler’s system provides a hopeful, flattering picture of human nature that is the antithesis of Freud’s dreary, pessimistic view. Certainly it is more satisfying to our sense of self-worth to consider ourselves capable of consciously shaping our development and destiny rather than being dominated by instinctual forces and childhood experiences over which we have no control.

Adler’s image is an optimistic one, simply that people are not driven by unconscious forces. We possess the free will to shape the social forces that influence us and to use them creatively to construct a unique style of life. This uniqueness is another aspect of Adler’s flattering picture; Freud’s system offered a depressing universality and sameness in human nature.

Although, in Adler’s view, some aspects of human nature are innate—for example, the potential for social interest and striving for perfection—it is experience that determines how these inherited tendencies will be realized. Childhood influences are important, particularly order of birth and interactions with our parents, but we are not victims of childhood events. Instead, we use them to create our style of life.

Adler saw each person as striving to achieve perfection, and he viewed humanity in similar terms; he was optimistic about social progress. He was attracted to socialism and was involved in school guidance clinics and prison reform, expressing his belief in the creative power of the individual.
Like Freud, Adler developed his theory by analyzing his patients; that is, by evaluating their verbalizations and behavior during therapy sessions. Adler’s approach was more relaxed and informal than Freud’s. Whereas Freud’s patients lay on a couch while he sat behind them, Adler and his patients sat in comfortable chairs facing each other. The sessions were more like chats between friends than like the formal relationships maintained by Freud.

Adler also liked to use humor in his therapy, sometimes teasing his patients in a lighthearted, friendly way. He had a storehouse of jokes appropriate for various neuroses and believed that making a joke would sometimes lead a patient to “see how ridiculous his sickness is.” When an adolescent patient told Adler he felt guilty when he masturbated, Adler replied: “You mean to say you masturbate and feel guilty? That is too much. One would be enough: either masturbate or feel guilty. But both is too much” (Hoffman, 1994, pp. 209, 273).

Adler assessed the personalities of his patients by observing everything about them: the way they walked and sat, their manner of shaking hands, even their choice of which chair to sit in. He suggested that the way we use our bodies indicates something of our style of life. Even the position in which we sleep is revealing. For example, according to Adler, restless sleepers and those who sleep flat on their back want to seem more important than they are. Sleeping on one’s stomach shows a stubborn and negative personality. Curling in the fetal position shows that the person is fearful of interacting with others. Sleeping with the arms outstretched reveals a need to be nurtured and supported.

Adler’s primary methods of assessment, which he referred to as the entrance gates to mental life, are order of birth (discussed above), early recollections, and dream analysis. In addition, contemporary psychologists have developed psychological assessment tests based on Adler’s concept of social interest. Adler’s purpose in assessing personality was to discover the patient’s style of life and to determine whether it was the most appropriate one for that person.

Early Recollections

According to Adler, our personality is created during the first 4 or 5 years of life. Our early recollections, our memories from that period, indicate the style of life that continues to characterize us as adults. Adler found that it made little difference whether his clients’ early recollections were of real events or were fantasies. In either case, the primary interest of the person’s life revolved around the remembered incidents and so, in Adler’s view, early recollections are “the most satisfactory single indicators of lifestyle” (Manaster & Mays, 2004, p. 114).

Adler asked more than 100 physicians to describe their early memories. A majority of the recollections were concerned with illness or with a death in the family, which apparently led them to pursue a career in medicine, as was the case with Adler himself.

An early memory Adler recalled as an adult was that when he was 5 years old and had just started school, he was fearful because the path to school led through a
cemetery (Adler, 1924/1963). He said he became terrified every time he walked to school, but he was also confused because other children seemed not to notice the cemetery. He was the only one who was afraid, and this experience heightened his sense of inferiority. One day, Adler decided to put an end to his fears. He ran through the cemetery a dozen times, until he felt he had overcome his feelings. Thereafter, he was able to attend school without being frightened whenever he passed the cemetery.

Thirty years later Adler met a former schoolmate and, in the course of their conversation, asked if the old cemetery was still there. The man expressed surprise and told Adler there had never been a cemetery near the school. Adler was shocked; his recollection had been so vivid! He sought out other classmates and questioned them about the cemetery. They all told him the same thing: There had been no cemetery. Adler finally accepted that his memory of the incident was faulty. Nonetheless, it symbolized the fear and inferiority, and his efforts to overcome them, which characterized his style of life. That early recollection thus revealed an important and influential aspect of his personality.

Although Adler believed that each early memory should be interpreted within the context of the patient’s style of life, he found commonalities among them. He suggested that memories involving danger or punishment indicated a tendency toward hostility. Those concerning the birth of a sibling showed a continued sense of dethronement. Memories that focused on one parent showed a preference for that parent. Recollections of improper behavior warned against any attempt to repeat the behavior.

Adler believed that

people remember from early childhood (a) only images that confirm and support their current views of themselves in the world . . . and (b) only those memories that support their direction of striving for significance and security. [His] focus on selective memory and lifestyle emphasize what is remembered. In contrast, Freud’s approach to interpreting early memories emphasizes what is forgotten through the mechanism of repression. (Kopp & Eckstein, 2004, p. 165)

**Dream Analysis**

Adler agreed with Freud about the value of dreams in understanding personality but disagreed on the way in which dreams should be interpreted. Adler did not believe that dreams fulfill wishes or reveal hidden conflicts. Rather, dreams involve our feelings about a current problem and what we intend to do about it.

One of Adler’s own dreams illustrates this point. Before his first visit to the United States, Adler felt anxious and worried, concerned about how he and his theory of personality would be received. The night before he was scheduled to cross the Atlantic Ocean by ship, he dreamed that the ship, with him aboard, capsized and sank.

All of Adler’s worldly possessions were on it and were destroyed by the raging waves. Hurled into the ocean, Adler was forced to swim for his life. Alone he thrashed and struggled through the choppy waters. But through the force of will and determination, he finally reached land in safety. (Hoffman, 1994, p. 151)
This dream revealed Adler’s fear about what he would face in the United States and his intention to land safely—in other words, to achieve success for himself and for his theory of individual psychology.

In the fantasies of our dreams (both night dreams and daydreams), we believe we can surmount the most difficult obstacle or simplify the most complex problem. Thus, dreams are oriented toward the present and future, not toward conflicts from the past.

Dreams should never be interpreted without knowledge of the person and his or her situation. The dream is a manifestation of a person’s style of life and so is unique to the individual. Adler did find common interpretations for some dreams, however. Many people reported dreams involving falling or flying. Freud interpreted such dreams in sexual terms.

According to Adler, a dream of falling indicates that the person’s emotional view involves a demotion or loss, such as the fear of losing self-esteem or prestige. A flying dream indicates a sense of striving upward, an ambitious style of life in which the person desires to be above or better than others. Dreams that combine flying and falling involve a fear of being too ambitious and thus failing. A dream of being chased suggests a feeling of weakness in relation to other people. Dreaming one is naked indicates a fear of giving oneself away. Additional Adlerian dream interpretations are shown in Table 3.1.

### Measures of Social Interest

Adler had no desire to use psychological tests to assess personality. He argued that tests create artificial situations that provide ambiguous results. Instead of relying on tests, Adler thought therapists should develop their intuition. He did, however, support tests of memory and intelligence; it was tests of personality he criticized.

Psychologists have developed tests to measure Adler’s concepts of social interest and style of life. The Social Interest Scale (SIS) consists of pairs of adjectives (Crandall, 1981). Research participants choose the word in each pair that best describes an attribute they would like to possess. Words such as helpful, sympathetic, and considerate are thought to indicate one’s degree of social interest. The Social Interest Index (SII) is a self-report inventory in which research participants judge

### Table 3.1 Dream events and their latent meanings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dream event</th>
<th>Adlerian interpretation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being paralyzed</td>
<td>Facing insoluble problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School exams</td>
<td>Being unprepared for situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing the wrong clothes</td>
<td>Being disturbed by one’s faults</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual themes</td>
<td>Retreating from sex or inadequate information about sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rage</td>
<td>An angry or hostile style of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>Unresolved issues about the dead person</td>
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</table>

Source: Adapted from Grey, 1998, p. 93.
the degree to which statements represent themselves or their personal characteristics (Greever, Tseng, & Friedland, 1973). The items, such as *I don’t mind helping out friends*, were selected to reflect Adler’s ideas and to indicate a person’s ability to accept and cooperate with others.

Research has shown that people who score high on the SII, indicating a high degree of social interest, tend to be high in friendliness, empathy, cooperation with others, tolerance, and independence. They have also been found to be lower in anxiety, hostility, depression, and neuroticism (Leak, 2006a, 2006b).

The Basic Adlerian Scales for Interpersonal Success (BASIS-A), is a 65-item self-report inventory designed to assess lifestyle as well as degree of social interest. The five personality dimensions measured are social interest, going along, taking charge, wanting recognition, and being cautious (Peluso, Peluso, Buckner, Curlette, & Kern, 2004).

Research on Adler’s Theory

Adler’s primary research method was the case study. Unfortunately, little of Adler’s data survived. He did not publish case histories except for two fragments: one written by a patient, the other written by a patient’s physician. Adler did not know the patients involved, but he analyzed their personalities by examining their writings.

Adler’s data and research method are subject to the same criticisms we discussed for Freud and Jung. His observations cannot be repeated and duplicated, nor were they conducted in a controlled and systematic fashion. Adler did not attempt to verify the accuracy of his patients’ reports or explain the procedures he used to analyze the data, and he had no interest in applying the experimental method. A follower wrote: “Adler wanted his psychology to be a science, but it has not been a psychology easily verified by the scientific method” (Manaster, 2006, p. 6).

Although most of Adler’s propositions have resisted attempts at scientific validation, several topics have been the subject of research. These include dreams, inferiority feelings, early recollections, pampering and neglect in childhood, social interest, and order of birth.

Dreams. Adler’s belief that dreams help us solve current problems was investigated by exposing research participants to situations in which the failure to solve a puzzle was considered a threat to the personality. The research participants were then allowed to sleep. Some were permitted to dream; they were awakened only during non-rapid-eye-movement (NREM) sleep. Others were awakened during rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep so that they could not dream. Research participants who dreamed recalled significantly more of the uncompleted puzzle than those who did not dream. The researchers concluded that dreaming enabled research participants to deal effectively with the current threatening situation—that is, the failure to solve the puzzle (Grieser, Greenberg, & Harrison, 1972).

In another study, the dreams of two groups of research participants were reported (Breger, Hunter, & Lane, 1971). One group consisted of college students who were anticipating a stressful psychotherapy session. The other group consisted
of patients about to undergo major surgery. For both groups, the recalled dreams focused on their conscious worries, fears, and hopes. Both types of research participants dreamed about the current problems they were facing.

**Inferiority feelings.** Research on Adler’s concept of inferiority feelings has found that adults who scored low on inferiority feelings tended to be more successful and self-confident and to be more persistent in trying to achieve their goals than adults who scored high on inferiority feelings. A study of American college students showed that those with moderate inferiority feelings had higher grade-point averages than those with low or high inferiority feelings (Strano & Petrocelli, 2005).

**Early recollections.** Classic research showed that early memories of people diagnosed as anxiety neurotics were concerned with fear; early memories of depressed persons centered on abandonment; and early memories of those with psychosomatic complaints involved illness (Jackson & Sechrest, 1962). Early memories of alcoholics contained threatening events, as well as situations in which they were controlled by external circumstances rather than by their own decisions. The early memories of a control group of nonalcoholics showed neither of these themes (Hafner, Fakouri, & Labrentz, 1982).

Early recollections of adult criminals dealt with disturbing or aggressive interactions with other people. They contained more unpleasant events than the early
recollections of a control group (Hankoff, 1987). The early memories of adolescent delinquents involved breaking rules, having difficulty forming social relationships, and being unable to cope with life on their own. They also perceived their parents as untrustworthy and as more likely to hurt than to help. These themes were not present in the early memories of a control group (Davidow & Bruhn, 1990).

Recollections of psychiatric patients considered dangerous to themselves and to others showed more aggressive early memories than did recollections of nondangerous psychiatric patients. The recollections of the dangerous patients revealed that they felt vulnerable and powerless and saw others as hostile and abusive (Tobey & Bruhn, 1992).

Research using objective scoring systems for early recollections has shown that these memories tend to be subjective re-creations rather than events that actually occurred, much like Adler’s memory of the cemetery (Statton & Wilborn, 1991).

One study reported that when research participants were asked to make up early recollections that might have happened to someone else, the themes were similar to those revealed by their own recollections (Buchanan, Kern, & Bell-Dumas, 1991). This study also provided research support for Adler’s contention that early recollections reveal one’s current style of life and therefore can be used as a therapeutic device. (Table 3.2 summarizes possible themes of early recollections.)

Early recollections studied in adults in the United States and in Israel have been shown to predict career preferences. For example, the early memories of physicists, mathematicians, and psychologists included themes such as curiosity, independent thought, and skepticism about information from authority figures (Clark, 2005; Kasler & Nevo, 2005).

Neglect in childhood. Adler suggested that children who were neglected or rejected by their parents developed feelings of worthlessness. A study of 714 adults hospitalized for depression found that the patients rated their parents as having been hostile, detached, and rejecting (Crook, Raskin, & Eliot, 1981). Interviews with siblings,

<table>
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<th>Table 3.2 Early recollections and style of life themes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recollection</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>First school memory</td>
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<td>First punishment memory</td>
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<tr>
<td>First sibling memory</td>
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<td>First family memory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clearest memory of mother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clearest memory of father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory of person you admire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiest memory</td>
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relatives, and friends of the patients confirmed that the parents had indeed behaved in hostile and neglectful ways.

In another study, parents of 8-year-old children completed a questionnaire to assess their child-rearing behaviors and their level of satisfaction with their children (Lefkowitz & Tesiny, 1984). Ten years later the children, then age 18, were given the depression scale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). Research participants whose test scores showed they were more depressed had been neglected in childhood by their parents. Those whose parents had not been indifferent or unloving scored lower on the depression scale.

Pampering in childhood. Adler noted that pampering in childhood could lead to a pampered style of life in which the person would demonstrate little or no social feelings for others. Research supports this idea and also suggests that pampering can lead to excessive narcissism, which involves a lack of responsibility or empathy for other people, an exaggerated sense of self-importance, and a tendency to exploit others. Studies have identified four types of pampering.

- Overindulgence, which involves the persistent parental gratification of a child’s needs and desires, leading to feelings of entitlement as well as tyrannical and manipulative behavior
- Overpermissiveness, which involves allowing children to behave as they please with no consideration for the effects of their behavior on other people, leading to a disregard of social rules and the rights of others
- Overdomination, which involves exclusive parental decision-making, leading to a child’s lack of self-confidence and a tendency to become dependent on others in adulthood
- Overprotection, which involves parental caution, excessively warning children of potential dangers in their environment, leading to generalized anxiety and a tendency to avoid or hide from social situations

Studies with college students found that children of overdomineering mothers were more likely to seek psychotherapy while in college. Students who rated their parents as both overindulgent and overprotective tended to be low in self-esteem. Students whose parents were considered to be both overindulgent and overdomineering scored high in narcissism (Capron, 2004).

Social interest. Research using the SIS showed that persons high in social interest reported less stress, depression, anxiety, and hostility than persons low in social interest. High social interest scorers scored higher on tests assessing cooperation with others, empathy, responsibility, and popularity (Crandall, 1984; Watkins, 1994; Watkins & St. John, 1994). Research with 105 college students found that those high in social interest scored high in spirituality and religiosity. However, their spirituality was of a positive, tolerant, and helping nature, not necessarily religious ethnocentrism or fundamentalism (Leak, 2006a). Another study of college students showed that those high in social interest were high in subjective well-being, agreeableness, self-identify, self-determination, and a strong sense of purpose in life (Leak & Leak, 2006).
A study of high-school adolescents in grades 9 to 12 found that those high in social interest scored significantly higher in overall life satisfaction, as well as satisfaction with friends and family, than did those who scored low in social interest (R. Gilman, 2001). Other research, conducted with male criminal offenders ranging in age from 18 to 40, showed that those who scored high in social interest were far less likely to commit additional crimes following their release from jail than were those who scored low in social interest (Daugherty, Murphy, & Paugh, 2001).

Studies with the SII showed that women who scored high in social interest were significantly higher in self-actualization, a characteristic of the healthy personality described by Abraham Maslow. Other research found that social interest was higher in women than in men and that it increased with age for both sexes (Greever, Tseng, & Friedland, 1973).

A study of 313 Latino men and women currently living in the United States found that research participants who were bicultural (well adjusted to living in both cultures) scored higher on social interest measures than research participants who were primarily acculturated to either the Latino lifestyle or the U.S. lifestyle alone (Miranda, Frevert, & Kern, 1998).

High social interest may also be good for your health. Social interest, with its related feelings of belonging, cooperation, and a sense of contributing to or receiving support from a social network has been positively associated with physical and mental well-being. For example, people who scored high in social interest tended to have stronger immune systems, fewer colds, lower blood pressure, and greater subjective well-being (Nikelly, 2005).

**Birth order.** Much research has been conducted on the effects of one’s order of birth within the family. Obviously, being the first-born, second-born, last-born, or an only child influences personality in a variety of ways. Simply having older or younger siblings, regardless of one’s own order of birth, can also affect personality. For example, studies of 18,876 people in England, Scotland, and Wales, and 3,432 people in the United States, found that the number of older brothers a man had could predict his sexual orientation. Boys who had older brothers were more sexually attracted to men than were boys who did not have older brothers. The more older brothers a man had, the greater was the attraction to the same sex. Having older sisters did not predict sexual orientation in women (Bogaert, 2003).

According to Adler, first-borns are concerned with power and authority. One way for first-borns to gain power and authority as adults is through achievement in their work. If Adler was correct, then first-borns should score high on measures of achievement, an idea that has received much research support. In many areas, from college attendance to high-level management, first-borns have been found to be overrepresented relative to their proportion of the population. More first-borns than later-borns become eminent, and they tend to attain greater intellectual achievement in academic settings and greater power and prestige in their careers (Breland, 1974; Schachter, 1963).

Studies conducted in the United States and in Poland found that first-borns scored higher in measures of intelligence, completed more years of formal education, and worked in more prestigious occupations than did later-borns (Herrera, Zajonce,
Research on adults in Sweden showed that first-borns scored higher than later-borns on tests of managerial or executive functioning. However, the first-borns in this study did not score higher than later-borns on intelligence tests (Holmgren, Molander, & Nilsson, 2006). A large-scale study of more than 240,000 male army recruits in Norway showed that older siblings scored higher on an IQ test than did younger siblings (Kristensen & Bjerkedal, 2007).

In general, then, evidence suggests that first-borns might be more intelligent than later-borns, although not all researchers agree (see, for example, Rodgers, 2001). The IQ scores of 400,000 European men were analyzed with respect to birth order (Belmont & Marolla, 1973). The results showed that first-borns had higher IQ scores than second-borns, second-borns had higher scores than third-borns, and so on. These findings were confirmed for men and women in several countries (Zajonc, Markus, & Markus, 1979). A possible explanation for the apparent higher intelligence of first-borns relates not to genetic differences but to the first-born’s exclusive exposure to adults. Consequently, first-borns may have a more stimulating intellectual environment than later-borns.

Vocational preferences for first-borns were found to include teaching, medicine, science, and management (Bryant, 1987). First-borns’ scores on an occupational interest inventory indicated a preference for socially oriented careers requiring good interpersonal skills (White, Campbell, Stewart, Davies, & Pilkington, 1997).

First-borns tend to be more dependent on other people and more suggestible. They are anxious in stressful situations and have a higher need for social relationships (Schachter, 1963, 1964). These findings could be predicted from Adler’s theory. He noted that first-borns are made anxious when dethroned by a sibling, and they attempt to regain their position by eventually conforming to their parents’ expectations. Accordingly, first-borns depend more than later-borns on the standards of others, including their parents, to guide their behavior and form the basis of their self-evaluations (Newman, Higgins, & Vookles, 1992).

Other research found that first-borns scored lower than later-borns on tests of depression and anxiety and higher on self-esteem (Gates, Lineberger, Crockett, & Hubbard, 1988). First-borns may also be more extraverted and conscientious than later-borns (Sulloway, 1995).

First-born girls were found to be more obedient and socially responsible than later-borns and tended to feel closer to their parents (Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970). Studies conducted in France, Croatia, Canada, and England showed that first-borns tended to be more closely supervised in childhood, were rated by their mothers as less fearful, reported more frightening childhood dreams, and scored higher in measures of dominance in college (Beck, Burnet, & Vosper, 2006; Begue & Roche, 2005; Kerestes, 2006; McCann, Stewin, & Short, 1990).

Less research has been conducted on second-born children. There appears to be no support for Adler’s contention that they are more competitive and ambitious than their siblings. One study found second-borns to be lower in self-esteem than first-borns or last-borns, particularly if the age difference between them and the other siblings was approximately 2 years (Kidwell, 1982).

A study of 198 first-born and second-born siblings, conducted over a period of 3 years, found that the attitudes, personalities, and leisure activities of the second-born
children were influenced more by their older siblings than by their parents (McHale, Updegraff, Helms-Erikson, & Crouter, 2001).

Adler predicted that last-born children, if excessively pampered, would have adjustment problems as adults. One frequently suggested reason for alcoholism is that some people cannot cope with the demands of everyday life. If so, then according to Adler’s theory, more last-borns than early-borns would become alcoholics. This prediction has been supported by many studies dealing with alcoholism and order of birth. Also, binge drinking in college has been found to be significantly higher among last-borns than among first-borns (Laird & Shelton, 2006).

To Adler, only-born adults are overly concerned with being the center of attention, as they were in childhood. He also considered only-borns to be more selfish than children reared with siblings. Research has not consistently supported this contention. One study found that only-borns demonstrated more cooperative behaviors than first-borns or last-borns (Falbo, 1978). Another study found that only-borns were more self-centered and less popular than were children with siblings (Jiao, Ji, & Jing, 1986).

An analysis of 115 studies of only-borns reported higher levels of achievement and intelligence than, and comparable social and emotional adjustment with, people who have siblings (Falbo & Polit, 1986). Other research (Mellor, 1990) confirmed those results and found that only children had higher levels of initiative, aspiration, industriousness, and self-esteem.

It has also been suggested that only-borns earn better grades in school. The results of an analysis of several studies show that the number of siblings is a consistent predictor of educational success; “individuals with the fewest siblings do the best” (Downey, 2001, p. 497). Only-borns may have more opportunities and parental resources, enabling them to perform better than children with siblings.

**Reflections on Adler’s Theory**

Adler’s influence within psychology has been substantial. In later chapters we see examples of his ideas in the work of other personality theorists. These contributions make Adler’s personality theory one of the most enduring. He was ahead of his time, and his cognitive and social emphases are more compatible with trends in psychology today than with the psychology of his own day. Abraham Maslow wrote: “Alfred Adler becomes more and more correct year by year. . . . As the facts come in, they give stronger and stronger support to his image of man” (Maslow, 1970a, p. 13).

Adler’s emphasis on social forces in personality can be seen in the theory of Karen Horney. His focus on the whole person and the unity of personality is reflected in the work of Gordon Allport. The creative power of the individual in shaping his or her style of life, and the insistence that future goals are more important than past events, influenced the work of Abraham Maslow. A social-learning theorist, Julian Rotter, wrote that he “was and continues to be impressed by Adler’s insights into human nature” (Rotter, 1982, pp. 1–2).

Adler’s ideas also reached into Freudian psychoanalysis. It was Adler who proposed the aggressive drive more than 12 years before Freud included aggression
with sex as primary motivating forces. The neo-Freudian ego psychologists, who focus more on conscious and rational processes and less on the unconscious, follow Adler’s lead.

Adler disputed Freud’s views on women, arguing that there was no biological basis, such as penis envy, for women’s alleged sense of inferiority. Such a notion, Adler charged, was a myth invented by men to maintain their alleged sense of superiority. He acknowledged that women may feel inferior but believed that was attributable to social conditioning and sex-role stereotyping. He also believed in the idea of equality for the sexes and supported the women’s emancipation movements of the day.

Specific Adlerian concepts of lasting importance to psychology include the early work on organic inferiority, which has influenced the study of psychosomatic disorders; the inferiority complex; compensation; and order of birth. Adler is also considered a forerunner of social psychology and group therapy.

Although his ideas have been widely accepted, Adler’s public recognition declined after his death in 1937, and he has received relatively little subsequent praise or credit for his contributions. Many concepts have been borrowed from his theory without acknowledgment. A typical instance of this lack of recognition can be found in Sigmund Freud’s obituary in the Times newspaper of London, which named Freud as the originator of the term inferiority complex. When Carl Jung died, the New York Times said he had coined the term. Neither newspaper mentioned Adler, the originator of the concept. However, Adler did receive one unique honor: a British composer named a string quartet for him.

As influential as Adler’s work has been, it does have its critics. Freud charged that Adler’s psychology was oversimplified and would therefore appeal to many people because it eliminated the complicated nature of the unconscious, had no difficult concepts, and ignored the problems of sex. Freud remarked that it could take 2 years or more to learn about his psychoanalysis, but “Adler’s ideas and technique can be easily learned in two weeks, because with Adler there is so little to know” (quoted in Sterba, 1982, p. 156).

It is true that Adler’s theory seems simpler than Freud’s or Jung’s, but that was Adler’s intention. He wrote that it had taken him 40 years to make his psychology simple. One point that reinforces the charge of oversimplification is that his books are easy to read because he wrote for the general public and because some of them were compiled from his popular lectures. (Figure 3.1) A related charge is that Adler’s concepts appear to rely heavily on commonsense observations from everyday life. A book reviewer in the New York Times noted: “Although [Adler] is one of the most eminent psychologists in the world, when he writes about psychology there is no other who can equal him in simplicity and non-technicality of language” (quoted in Hoffman, 1994, p. 276).

Critics allege that Adler was inconsistent and unsystematic in his thinking and that his theory contains gaps and unanswered questions. Are inferiority feelings the only problem we face in life? Do all people strive primarily for perfection? Can we become reconciled to a degree of inferiority and no longer attempt to compensate for it? These and other questions that have been posed cannot all be answered adequately by Adler’s system; most theorists, however, leave us with unanswered questions.
Some psychologists dispute Adler’s position on the issue of determinism versus free will. Early in his career, Adler did not oppose the notion of determinism. It was broadly accepted in science at the time, and it characterized Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Later, Adler felt the need to grant more autonomy to the self, and his final formulation rejected determinism. His concept of the creative self proposes that before the age of 5 we fashion a style of life using material provided by our heredity and our environment. However, it is not clear how a child is able to make such momentous decisions. We know that Adler favored free will and opposed the idea that we are victims of innate forces and childhood events. That position is clear, but the specifics of forming the style of life are not.

Adler’s followers claim that individual psychology remains popular among psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and educators. Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research and Practice is published quarterly by the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology. Other Adlerian journals are published in Germany, Italy, and France. Adlerian training institutes have been established in New York, Chicago, and other cities. Adlerian counseling techniques have been developed by Rudolph Dreikurs and others, and this work has influenced new
generations of Adlerian clinicians in what Dreikurs calls family education centers. Dreikurs’s work on child-rearing practices applies Adler’s views to contemporary problems not only in child development, but also in the treatment of the family as a whole.

**Chapter Summary**

Adler’s childhood was marked by intense efforts to compensate for his feelings of inferiority. His system of individual psychology differs from Freudian psychoanalysis in its focus on the uniqueness of the individual, on consciousness, and on social rather than biological forces. It minimizes the role of sex.

Inferiority feelings are the source of all human striving, which results from our attempts to compensate for these feelings. Inferiority feelings are universal and are determined by the infant’s helplessness and dependency on adults. An inferiority complex (that is, an inability to solve life’s problems) results from being unable to compensate for inferiority feelings. An inferiority complex can originate in childhood through organic inferiority, spoiling, or neglect. A superiority complex (an exaggerated opinion of one’s abilities and accomplishments) results from overcompensation.

Our ultimate goal is superiority or perfection; that is, making the personality whole or complete. Fictional finalism refers to fictional ideas, such as perfection, that guide our behavior. Style of life refers to unique patterns of characteristics and behaviors by which we strive for perfection. The creative power of the self refers to our ability to create our selves from the materials provided by our heredity and environment. Four basic styles of life are the dominant or ruling type, the getting type, the avoiding type, and the socially useful type. Social interest is innate but the extent to which it is realized depends on early social experiences.

Order of birth is a major social influence in childhood from which one’s style of life is created. First-borns are oriented toward the past, pessimistic about the future, and concerned with maintaining order and authority. Second-borns compete with first-borns and are apt to be ambitious. Last-borns, spurred by the need to surpass older siblings, may become high achievers. Only children may mature early but are apt to face a shock in school when they are no longer the center of attention.

Adler’s image of human nature is more hopeful than is Freud’s. In Adler’s view, people are unique, and they possess free will and the ability to shape their own development. Although childhood experiences are important, we are not victims of them.

Adler’s methods of assessment are order of birth, early recollections, and dream analysis. Research has provided support for Adler’s views on the following: dreams, early memories, and childhood neglect and pampering; his belief that social interest is related to emotional well-being; the idea that first-borns are high achievers, dependent on others, suggestible, and anxious under stress; and the notion that last-borns are more likely to become alcoholics.

Adler’s emphasis on cognitive and social factors in personality, the unity of personality, the creative power of the self, the importance of goals, and cognitive factors has influenced many personality theorists.
Review Questions

1. Explain how Adler’s theory of personality is at least partly a reflection of his own childhood experiences.

2. On what points did Adler differ with Freud?

3. What is the difference between inferiority feelings and the inferiority complex? How does each develop?

4. How does the superiority complex differ from the idea of striving for superiority? How did Adler define superiority?

5. Describe the concept of fictional finalism. Explain how fictional finalism relates to the notion of striving for superiority.

6. How does the self develop? Do people play an active or a passive role in the development of the self?

7. What are the four basic styles of life, according to Adler?

8. What parental behaviors may foster a child’s development of social interest? Which basic style of life is identified with social interest?

9. Describe the personality characteristics proposed by Adler that may develop in first-born, second-born, and youngest children as a result of their order of birth within the family.

10. According to Adler, what are the advantages and disadvantages of being an only child?

11. If it were possible to choose, which birth order position would you select for yourself in your family? Why?

12. Describe research on the personality of first-born and only-born children. Do the results support Adler’s predictions?

13. How does Adler’s image of human nature differ from Freud’s?

14. Describe the approaches Adler used to assess the personalities of his patients.

15. What is the importance of early recollections in personality assessment? Give an example of how one of Adler’s recollections revealed an aspect of his personality.

16. What is the purpose of dreams? Does contemporary research on sleep and dreaming support Adler’s views?

17. How do people who score high in social interest differ from people who score low?

18. Discuss the criticisms and contributions of Adler’s system within psychology today.

Suggested Readings


Hoffman, E. (1994). The drive for self: Alfred Adler and the founding of individual psychology. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. Discusses Adler’s contributions to personality theory, psychoanalysis, and popular psychology. Recounts events in his life as the basis for familiar concepts such as inferiority complex, overcompensation, and lifestyle.

