Alfred Adler

Born: 7-Feb-1870
Birthplace: Penzing, Austria
Died: 28-May-1937
Location of death: Aberdeen, Scotland
Cause of death: Heart Failure

Gender: Male
Religion: Jewish
Race or Ethnicity: White
Sexual orientation: Straight
Occupation: Psychologist

Nationality: Austria
Executive summary: Founder of Individual Psychology

Austrian medical doctor and psychologist Alfred Adler is best known as the founder of Individual Psychology. In addition he is credited, along with Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, as one of the greatest founding influences of modern psychology. Among Adler’s chief contributions are the importance of birth order in the formation of personality, the impact of neglect or pampering on child development, the notion of a "self perfecting" drive within human beings, and the idea that one must study and treat the patient as a "who person." Other important tenets of Adler's theory are the idea that individuals create a "fiction" or story about themselves in childhood that guides their perceptions and choices throughout life, and that the ability to work with others for a common good was the hallmark of sound mental health. Adler was a firm proponent of egalitarian relations between patients and analysts. Adler's best known works include The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology (1927) and Understanding Human Nature (1927). Much of his theory can also be found in the more recently published The Collected Clinical Works of Alfred Adler, a ten-volume edition containing works from 1898-1937.

Alfred Adler was born the second of six children in Penzing, Austria on February 7, 1870, the son of a Jewish grain merchant. Sickly as a child, he did not walk until age four because of rickets; at age five Adler developed pneumonia and was diagnosed as unlikely to survive. He did recover, but was so profoundly shaken by the experience that he resolved to become a doctor himself someday in order to help the suffering caused by such illness and disease. This accomplishment began to look out of reach later when he was struggling in school and failing at math. The teacher suggested that young Adler be removed from school and apprenticed to a cobbler. But his father only scoffed at the teacher, letting the boy know how little he thought of the teacher's judgment. Adler then became determined to excel and show the teacher just how wrong he was. He was soon at the top of his class in mathematics.

Such experiences help shape Adler's theories of personality development, especially his belief that the
most basic human drive is the striving from an initial state of inadequacy, or what he termed "inferiority toward "superiority", or self-actualization. In 1895 Adler successfully earned his medical degree, graduating from the University of Vienna. In the course of his work as a physician he made study of the interplay between what he termed "organ deficiency" (illness, physical handicaps, etc.) and an individual's personality and self-image.

In 1902 he was one of the few to read Sigmund Freud's book on dream interpretation and respond with positive interest. He consequently received a handwritten invitation to join Freud's inner circle, a week discussion group on current developments in psychopathology. Adler had published a book of his own few years prior which had set forth, amongst other things, the need to perceive the patient as a whole person. Thus Freud's increasing tendency to carve the person up into rigid and highly abstracted concepts such as Ego and Id and Oedipal Complex, did not sit well with Adler. Freud's insistence on interpreting all of a patient's troubles as sexual in nature, no matter how far he had to reach to do so, only underscored this troublesome reductionism.

Finally, in 1911, Adler split with Freud to form his own group, taking several other members of the Freudian school with him. The following year, in 1912, he published *The Neurotic Constitution*, where at last introduced the term "individual psychology." For Adler the individual was the smallest unit for study and description (not the Id, etc.), and he took as his focus the individual in relation to his larger community in context — his family, work associates, society. The individual's level of functionality and fulfillment as part of the group was Adler's chief indicator of wellness.

Adler's subsequent experiences during the First World War only strengthened this perception. Serving as a physician, first with the Austrian Army at the Russian front, and then in a children's hospital, Adler's first hand the horrifying results of war and social conflict. Here was personality dysfunction carried on its ugliest extreme. Misguided individuals with the power, not only of their own fist or weaponry, but with that of entire armies at their command, wreaked terrible havoc and suffering. Of course, brutal dictators were highly unlikely to submit themselves to the analyst's couch.

In Adler's view, one must address personality dysfunction in childhood to have the greatest effect, both alleviate individual suffering, but also to address societal ills. In 1918, after the war's end, he founded a number of child guidance clinics in Vienna, which soon became the prototype for other such clinics abroad. In his work he gained a wealth of information about children and the development of personality seeking to understand what created dysfunction. Thus onto his emphasis of the role played by "organ dysfunction" in the development of personality problems, he elaborated three other factors that made significant impact: "pampering", "neglect", as well as birth order.

According to Adler it was these types of key events and circumstances that shaped how children perceived themselves, or rather, shaped the story they told themselves about themselves. By age five the story, or "fiction", about themselves had solidified, according to Adler, and from this point on it would serve as the framework through which the child interpreted and responded to events. Adler called the story that we tell ourselves (much of it unconscious) a "fiction", to distinguish it from who and how an individual really is.

The term "fiction" originated in the work of philosopher Hans Vaihinger (The Philosophy of "As If"). Vaihinger pointed out that human beings are seldom able to glimpse (let alone grasp) absolute truth. As they settle for partial truth -- that is, for a less than accurate mental model. These partial truths meanwhile help us think about and respond to the world, until we came up with a better theory, a better partial truth. In this Vaihinger's partial truths, or "fictions", serve in a similar way to the "cognitive
structures" envisioned by psychologist Erik Erikson. These fictions then govern not only how we see the world, and ourselves in relation to it, but they govern the very choices we make. Adler felt that if we could help the individual identify fictions that were dysfunctionally inaccurate, and help them develop a new one, a new self-image and goal, they would lead a happier more productive life.

An extension of this basic theory was Adler's approach to collecting information on his patients. To be with he developed and refined a technique that focused on assessing the individual's drive (toward "superiority", later renamed self-perfection), degree of activity, and his "social interest" (desire to contribute, and to work for a greater good). His assessments were qualitative, subtle, and complex. And he based them upon a patient's dreams, statements about relationships and childhood traumas, as well as medical history and the circumstances under which the current troubles arose. He felt that literal truth of the patients' reporting was only part of the story -- what the patient chose to tell and the manner in which they related it were also significant. All of it came together to lead the analyst, over time, into an understanding of the original "fiction" that was leading matters awry, and a plan for getting the patient back on track.

Significantly however, Adler did not feel it was effective to merely "enlighten" a patient by announcing what the problem supposedly was. Rather, through careful question or "Socratic dialogue", the analyst would also lead the patient through the process of seeing the matter for himself, and being part of the process of formulating a new perspective. Above all, Adler adamantly advised that the analyst must also maintain a non-authoritarian relationship with the patient. Egalitarianism and engaged empathy should form the basis of their interaction. In this too, Adler was advocating his overall vision for society that of individuals working together with empathy and compassion for a greater good.

Perhaps because his emphasis was so rooted in the daily and real life experience of individuals, in contrast to the sexually obsessed abstractions of Freud and mysticism of Jung, Adler's theory and methodology have found broad acceptance and influence within the mainstream of psychology. Not only does his philosophy remain popular with new students of psychology today, but his influence can also be perceived within the works of Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, Karen Horney, Julian Rott E. C. Tolman, and Carl Rogers. ICASSI and NASAP (North American Society for Adlerian Psychology) both continue to promote his work; in addition a number of schools, dedicated specifically to carry on his philosophy, exist in the various countries. Most notable among these in the United States is The Adler School of Professional Psychology, originally founded by Rudolf Dreikurs as The Alfred Adler School Professional Psychology.

Adler himself had first brought his influence to America in 1926. Although his written works were already known to some, his lectures at Columbia University impressed many -- a fact due largely to the content, but also to the ease with which he communicated his ideas. In 1932 he was accorded the first chair of Visiting Professor at Long Island College of Medicine, and he began spending only his summers in Vienna. In 1934 the Nazis forced him to close his clinics, because he was a Jew. He moved permanent to the United States, bringing his family with him. In May of 1937 he made a visit to Aberdeen, Scotland, where he was to lecture at the University. While there he collapsed suddenly in the street and died.

**Author of books:**

*The Neurotic Constitution* (1912)

*The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology* (1927, psychology)

*Understanding Human Nature* (1927, psychology)