Concepts of Individual Psychology

Individual Psychology is a mature psychological system with a wide range of concepts. It is one of the three major schools of psychodynamic theory and therapy. From the beginning, Adler wanted his approach to be easily understood and so used words and ideas already familiar to his listeners. For example, sibling rivalry was familiar from the biblical stories of Cain and Abel, as well as Joseph’s mistreatment by his brothers.” Thus his approach, because of its clarity and “common sense” terminology, appealed to a wide range of people beyond the medical profession. (Again: I’ve eliminated footnotes and references, and offer a free list of references by email.)

For over a century, the contributions of Dr. Alfred Adler (1870-1937) have been central to the formation of twentieth century psychology and psychotherapy. His ideas and methods have been a major contribution to, and even influence on, theory and practice in nearly all the counseling approaches used in the twentieth century.

The modern era of interest in psychological ideas is connected in the public mind with the name of Sigmund Freud and there can be no doubt about his influence. There were, however, two key events which ushered in the modern era: Freud’s publication in 1900 of his The Interpretation of Dreams, and his joining with Alfred Adler in 1902 to seek a psychological treatment for the neuroses.

Freud is well known as the founder of psychoanalysis and psycho-dynamic theory. Yet Adler’s contributions, and his Individual Psychology as a theory of personality and therapeutic method, have had a marked effect on the field. Although many people recognize Adler’s terms (inferiority, compensation, life style, sibling rivalry, etc.) they do not usually recognize them as Adler’s. Adlerian partisans hold that his pioneering efforts when the field was young resulted in nearly everything he did becoming important for what would come later:

- **Humanistic/Existential psychologies:** The writings of Carl Rogers, Viktor Frankl, and Rollo May (all at some time students of Adler) often restate Adlerian concepts from decades before. Likewise much of what became the “human potential movement,” including Rogers’ “encounter groups” and Perls’ “Gestalt therapy,” owes much to Adler’s original ideas.

- **Self-actualization psychology** and the **hierarchy of needs** theory of Abraham Maslow, also a student and close friend.

- **Neo-Freudians:** Karen Horney, Melanie Klein, Eric Fromm, Harry Stack Sullivan, and Eric Erickson (and even Freud’s daughter, Anna Freud), would better be called “neo-Adlerians.” Benjamin Wolman, in his textbook on psychological theories, says,
  
  o The inclusion of social forces on personality by neo-Freudians comes more from Adler’s ideas than anything Freud wrote or said. The similarity of their ideas and Adler’s has led to the observation that, a graduate student would run the risk of being accused of plagiarism if he were to approach another writer so closely.

- **Cognitive Therapy:** Rational-Emotive Therapy (Ellis), Cognitive Therapy (Beck), and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Bandler and Grinder) are basically restatements of Adler’s much earlier ideas, as will be explored later in detail.

- **Transactional Analysis:** Objective observers have noted there are many similarities between major Adlerian concepts and Berne’s Transactional Analysis, such as similarities between Berne’s Games People Play and Adler’s Problems of Neurosis, and Berne’s “Life Scripts” and Adler’s “Life Style.”

- **Psychoanalysis:** Joost Meerloo (a Freudian) said that, “the whole body of psychoanalysis and psychiatry is imbued with Adler’s ideas, although few want to acknowledge this fact. We are all plagiarists, though we hate to confess it. The whole body of social psychiatry would have been impossible without Adler’s pioneering zest.”

Various Adlerians have suggested reasons why Adler has not received credit for his contributions. Mosak and Dreikurs observed that, in America after WW II, “The Freudian school held a near monopoly both in the treatment
area and with respect to appointments in medical schools. The Ansbachers said that “Adler’s writings are unsystematic and therefore make unsatisfactory reading.” Others suggest his contributions were so basic and so quickly integrated at a time when the field was young and pliant that they became standard while their originator was forgotten.

Ruth Monroe, in her classic comparison of psychodynamic theories, said, “Adler’s fate is like that of Heine, whole little masterpiece, The Lorelei, attained such prompt popularity that when he himself asked a group of people singing it for the name of the author, he was told, ‘Why nobody wrote it — it’s a folk song.’ ”

It was a time ripe for new ideas, yet Adlerians believe nearly every theory and method of modern psychological treatment today has its roots in something Adler said or did. Therapists do not realize how much of what they do is “Adlerian.” As psychiatrist Joseph Wilder put it, “The question is not whether one is Adlerian but how much of an Adlerian one is.” Of major practitioners, Albert Ellis (Rational Emotive Therapy) and Aaron Beck (Cognitive Therapy) acknowledge their debt to Adler.

There was never a cult of personality around Adler as there was around Freud and Jung (and more recently, Perls and Berne). Therefore, his ideas had to stand on their own apart from any personal charisma. Even so, they have stood for a century, often reappearing as “new” ideas. The informed person sees Adler in them, even if a direct line cannot be traced. So while practitioners may not know that Adler pioneered the ideas that guide their work, or the modalities (such as group therapy, family therapy, and marital therapy, for three examples), they use them all the same.

Central to Adler is that the focus of counseling is to alter a client’s perceptual scheme (apperceiptive schema) by reframing, re-wording, or re-perceiving the event that led to erroneous ideas. Such errors encourage mistaken thinking, the neurotic Life Style, Private Logic, the client’s Guiding Goal, Guiding Line, and Guiding Movement, and more. This fundamental (Adlerian) idea is basic to most therapies practiced today, from Gestalt Therapy and Transactional Analysis to the “cognitive” therapies: of Ellis, Beck, and Bandler (Neuro-Linguistic Programming).

The Unity of Adler’s Psychological System

We begin this parade of concepts with “unity,” the keynote of Adler’s approach to psychology, therapy, and most of all, personality. I want to make it clear that this is not simply a list of separate ideas, but a singular system in which the components fit together and support each other. There is a biblical reference that makes its own point, but is useful here as a way to describe how what seem to be parts actually make up a whole. This isn’t a sermon, but a way to understand Adler’s approach to his own psychology.

In St. Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth (chapter 12), he appears to be responding to an argument that was threatening to divide the fledgling church. It was about which church members and which of their talents were more important. Some were good at administration, others were able to speak in tongues, still others had “gifts” of prophecy or healing. It seems that some were lording it over others because they thought they had been singled out (by the Holy Spirit) to receive gifts that were “better” than certain other gifts. This is how Paul answered them:

There are different kinds of gifts, but one Spirit who distributes them; there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord who is served. There are different kinds of works, but in all of them it is the same God who is working.

Every gift the Spirit gives is for the common good. Here are some of the gifts he gives: (1) a message of wisdom, (2) knowledge by the Spirit, (3) faith by the same Spirit, (4) healing by the Spirit, (5) miracles, (6) prophecy (7) distinguishing between spirits, (8) speaking in different languages, (9) how to interpret languages. They are different gifts but all are given by the one Spirit, as he decides.

So far so good. Paul’s letter was passed around to be read, or it was read aloud to the church members. (They were quite literate and most could read for themselves, being Jews who knew Hebrew, Romans who knew Latin, or Greeks who knew the popular form of Greek called “koinè.”) You can see some of them nodding as they heard Paul name their gift. They waited for him to tell them that their gift was special, above and apart from the others! Paul continues:

Just as a body, though one, has many members (but all its many members form a single body, so it is with the church. When we were baptized, it was by one holy spirit and to form the one Body of Christ. That body is not made up of one member but of many: the feet, the hands, the ears, the eyes, and all the other parts of the body.

What if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body.” It would not stop being part of the body! And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not stop being part of the body. What if the entire body were an eye? Where would be the sense of hearing be? If the body were an ear, how would it smell anything without the sense of smell? In fact, God has arranged all the parts of the body as he wanted them to be. If they were all only one part, how could it be a body? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.
The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” nor can the head say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” Indeed, sometimes the body parts that seem weakest are the most indispensable! But God has put the body together so there should be no division, but that its parts should be equal with each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers. Now you are the body of Christ, and individually a part of it.

At which point St. Paul says “I will show you an even better way” (than arguing over who is better or superior to others or who has better gifts or talents) and quotes the famous Christian poem most of them probably already knew, which begins: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal...”

I hope you get my point, but I’ll spell it out: Paul’s way of describing the early church as a unity of parts is like Adler’s way of describing his system of psychology and his understanding of human personality. With that in mind, let’s look at the concepts of Adler’s “Individual Psychology.”

**Major concepts of Adlerian Psychology**

**Unity of Personality.**

Adler viewed the person not as a collection of separate parts (think of Freud’s Id, Ego, Superego, and Libido, or his multi-tiered mind: Conscious, Preconscious, Unconscious). Adler named his approach Individual Psychology, from the Latin *individuum*, or “that which is whole and cannot be separated into parts.” For Adler, the person was a singular unity. Personality is integrated and self-consistent, a dynamic system. Everything that might be considered “part” of a person (read St. Paul about the body!) was considered under this concept of unity.

The Ansbachers said, “The findings of Individual Psychology point to the fact that all behavior of a human being fits into a unity, and is an expression of the individual’s style of life.” The complete, integrated pattern was seen to serve a person’s ultimate goals. Adler’s was the first holistic psychology.

In LEAP we speak of Ten LifeCourse Patterns. We can number them; they must be separate! In the last session we speak of the Patterns as making up one pattern, much as a bunch of maps make up a single collection of maps we call an “atlas.” Maps guide us in unfamiliar territory; an atlas guides our movement through the entire land. Following the idea of Unity, we say that the Patterns are not separate from each other, but are a unified system, like the body in Paul’s analogy. We can make a comparison:

| What if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body.” It would not stop being part of the body! And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not stop being part of the body. What if the entire body were an eye? Where would be the sense of hearing be? If the body were an ear, how would it smell anything without the sense of smell? In fact, God has arranged all the parts of the body as he wanted them to be. If they were all only one part, how could it be a body? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. | What if Background should say, “Because I am not Beginning, I do not belong,” that would not stop it from being part of the person! And if the Birth Order should say, “Because I am not Belonging, I am not part of the person” it doesn’t stop being part of the person. What if the whole person were a Behaving Pattern? Where would be Believing? Bewildering? Being? Becoming? In fact, there are not many separate patterns to personality, but a single, unified pattern. As we see, there are many patterns to a personality, but one personality. |

For Adler, the personality as unified and self-consistent was connected with the fictional final goal or guiding self-ideal, by which a person organizes all of life and its activities in order to achieve the idealized solution to life’s Problem. As he stated,

The consideration of the unity of the personality led us to the conviction that early in life, in the first four or five years, a goal is set for the need and drive of psychical development, a goal toward which all its current flow. Such a goal not only determines the direction which promises security, power, and perfection, but also awakens the corresponding feelings and emotions through that which it promises. Thus the individual mitigates his sense of weakness in the anticipation of his redemption.

So we have a picture of a singular person with a goal and a way to get there, developed in childhood and passed to the adult as the major life activity and in which all aspects of the individual are join together to achieve. Not a person with many separate parts, but a one whose aspects all work together for the good of the personality.

**Purpose; Goal-directedness**

Individual Psychology is teleological in that it views personality as oriented toward the future rather than caused by the past. Behavior is governed by, serves, and expresses a person’s goals, in particular the fictional final goal.
When we wonder why we think, feel or act a certain way, we think causally, seeking the cause of our behavior somewhere in the past. I thus explain my behavior what happened before, in my personal (or perhaps the world’s) history. Instead, Individual Psychology asks, “Behavior is chosen; it is chosen for a purpose. So in behaving as I do, I ask not about the past but about the future. I ask “Why do I intend as a result of this behavior in the future?” Applied to psychotherapy, this is a teleoanalytic approach which examines behaviors in terms of intended outcomes and their relation to the Life Style. As Adler put it,

A person would not know what to do with himself were he not oriented toward some goal. We cannot think, feel, will, or act without the perception of some goal. All the causalities in the world do not enable the living organism to conquer the chaos of the future and the planlessness of which we should be the victims. . . . Without any self-consistency, physiognomy, and personal note we would rank with the amoeba. Inanimate nature obeys a perceptible causality, but life is [subjectively] a demand.

Related is the twin concept of “sequence and consequence,” in which results (consequences) are the choices at the end of a sequence. Adlerians consider two types of consequences of behavior:

- **Natural consequences** arise from the logic of the natural order of things. When a tree falls in the forest, it makes a noise. If you touch something hot, you get burned. If you don’t eat something, you get hungry.

- **Logical consequences** arise from the logic of the social order, from what people expect of us in social interactions and our place in the community (whether among siblings, in the family, in school, at work, or wherever). People expect us to be nice to others, and if you are nasty people will avoid you (or perhaps be nasty back). If you are a friend to others, they will be friendly to you.”

As you see, logical or social consequences assume a balance in relationships. We do something, and there is a result. For the most part, we are relatively free to choose. Therefore, the consequence of my behavior (which is always aimed at getting a result) comes at the end of the sequence that I choose. Such consequences are basic to the Adlerian/Dreikurs approach to child behavior. Mom says to the child, “You may be quiet while we are watching TV, or you may go to your room.” Child continues to be noisy. Mom takes child firmly and guides him to his room, saying, “I see you have chosen to go to your room. You can come back and be with us when you decide to be quiet.”

Notice the bargain. The adult who is disturbed by the child’s behavior sets the child’s options. They are either/or and they are presented as choices. Either choice is OK with Mom (stay and be quiet, or go to your room), and it is up to the child to decide. This is not merely a way to encourage desired family behavior, it is also a fundamental lesson about life, that there are consequences to what one does, often presented by others. This is not punishment in which the stronger person overcomes the weaker one, or establishes dominance or power. person. This is the way the world usually operates.

**Subjectivity**

Adler introduced the concept of subjectivity as an explanation for how one sees one’s world. He spoke of “personal perspective” and “personal perception” or “the subjective framework” or “the perceptual schema.” Whatever he called it, he emphasized that people see things not as they are, but as they want them to be. (Psychology, at least, emphasized that “things are as they are” and if people see things differently, there must be something wrong with them. Adler’s point of view was already old, however, in the thought of Greek philosophers, and in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher/theological who founded modern existentialism.

Related is “Phenomenology” (from the Greek phainómenon ["that which appears"] and -lógos [study of, or words about], the philosophical study of subjective experience starting with Edmund Husserl, in the early 20th century. Also related is “epistemology” (Greek epistémē for “knowledge, understanding”) and the study of how knowledge is gained and to what extent anything can truly “be known.”

In 1845, Denmark’s most famous son wrote *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in which three words now stand as the opening shot that became existentialism: “Subjectivity is truth.” (Or: “Truth is subjectivity.”) He meant by it that truth is personal and subjective, not factual or “merely real.” Such subjective truth becomes the basis for what is done, one’s behavior.

There is nothing in Adler’s writings to suggest he knew of or read Kierkegaard. Yet their idea about “subjectivity” and “truth” are so similar as to be frightening! People experience events within a highly personal framework, what Adler called the *apperceptive schema*. The result is personal beliefs about self, others, and the world. These beliefs become one’s personal truth. (Hah! Kierkegaard’s “subjective truth.”) In common terms, we take everything personally, as if everything that happens applies to us. We
believe our perceptions to be accurate, realistc, truthful...in a word, The Truth. Or in Vaihinger’s terms, we *act as if* they are true. Adler’s was the first phenomenological or existential psychology, although he never used those words. Subjectivity is a central point in Individual Psychology. It was not popular when Adler suggested it, since the general view of man was deterministic, with behavior “caused” by past events or outside sources. Even so, he said:

For me there can be no doubt that everyone conducts himself in life from the very beginning of his action as if he had a definite opinion of his strength and his abilities and a clear conception of the difficulty or ease of the problem at hand. In a word, I am convinced that a person’s behavior springs from his opinion. We should not be surprised at this, because our senses do not receive actual facts, but merely a subjective image of them, a reflection of the external world. In considering the structure of a personality, the chief difficulty is that its unity, its particular style of life and goal, is not built upon objective reality but upon the subjective view the individual takes of the facts of life. Each person organizes himself according to his personal view of things, and some views are more sound, some less sound.

**Inferiority and Superiority**

Adler’s best-known concept comes from very early in his career. (Note that the LEAP material includes a complete transcript of Adler’s 1907 monograph, *Study of organ inferiority and its psychical compensation: A contribution to clinical medicine.* This concept is that, as children, we feel inferior to others: weak where they are strong, dependent where they are independent, etc. This is a “natural” consequence of early childhood, compared with adults or older siblings. Internalized and carried forward in life as a self-definition, however, it becomes an *inference complex.* Adler at first explained it in terms of physical or organ inferiority (size, weakness, or disability) but later expanded it to include social factors and spoke of *inferiority feelings.* He said that, internalized and carried into adulthood, such a self-assessment (or minus self-rating) led to over-compensation by a *will to power* which becomes a *superiority complex* and a *striving for superiority* toward the plus side of life.

Unlike many in his time and profession, Adler had a highly positive view of people, both actual and potential. Freud followed the thinking of 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who believed in Man as an “untamed beast” within.) So when Adler said young children were inferior, he was not thinking of “original sin” nor that a child is a small animal that needs to be tamed by strict discipline and punishment. He said everyone begins life as inferior in the sense that we are all small, weak, and slow compared with siblings, parents, etc., who are large, strong, and fast. He said that some children decide they must overcome the situation by over-achievement, over-compensation, and over-superiority. In such as case, the child has internalized the self-definition, “I am inferior,” which is a choice the child makes about himself, and not a condition, placed on him externally.

Childhood, like all of life, involves problems and problem-solving. Adler believed that, from all of childhood’s problems, one will emerge as unable to be solved by the child. Yet it must be solved if life is to have meaning, for until it is solved one will remain inferior and vulnerable. Thus to solve it will provide safety, mastery and power. The belief that there is a Perfect Solution and that one spend the rest of one’s life to find it, becomes what Adler called the individual’s *fictional final goal* which underlies and explains all other behaviors. Because The Problem takes place early in life (when inferiority feelings are also running rampant), it is likely that The Problem involves some feeling of inferiority that must be turned into superiority sometime in life.

**Private Logic; Common Sense**

Feeling inferior makes us vulnerable. We use *Private Logic* (also “private intelligence”) to excuse and justify self-oriented behavior. So one may reason, “I can do what I want,” or, “I don’t have to follow rules.”

A robber-murder expresses himself: “This young man had beautiful suits and I had none. That is why I killed him.” This is quite intelligent thinking and acting. Since he is not confident that he is able to acquire suits in the *generally usual manner,* on the generally useful side of life, he can in fact attain beautiful suits only by robbing. To do this he must kill the other person. [These and similar examples] will always find arguments which are completely “intelligent”. . . by which to reach their goals. . . [and are] “intelligent” in respect to the goal of personal superiority on the useless side of life. This private intelligence is to be sharply differentiated from that one must call reason, common sense. We find intelligence in both cases, but we call reason the kind of intelligence which is connected with social interest.

Individual Psychology contrasts Private Logic with *Common Sense* (the community’s wisdom about ways people should behave among others, right and wrong, morality, values, ethics). The child is exposed to this community wisdom in the words and actions of others, religious teachings, folk sayings, customs, etc. Private Logic justifies socially useless behavior, while Common Sense encourages socially useful behavior. It is, as Adler noted, “thinking which corresponds to the human community.” He equated common sense with the ability of the individual to “be intelligent” or “reasonable” in socially-useful ways.
Adlerian therapy is **teleoanalytic** in that it is oriented toward the future, the telos (Greek for “end”) of one or a series of movements. For Adlerians the “end” is the result of one’s behavior, conscious or non-conscious, the final event, the outcome, result, or end product. The “end” is not caused by, but is the logical result of one’s aim, intention, purpose, or design. The purpose in therapy is to uncover the client’s Private Logic (or “reasoning” or “intelligence”), show how it is self- rather than community-oriented, and explain this to the client as a mistaken style of living based on mistaken thinking.

Such self-oriented thinking is the basis for many of the individual’s problems in life. It not only excuses “socially useless” behaviors, but also justifies maintaining a generally mistaken style of life. Adler “made guesses” about the client with words such as, “I wonder...” or “Could it be that...” or even, “Let me make a guess...” For example, a therapist might say, “I wonder if, when you say that your parents compared you unfavorably to your older sibling, you are really giving yourself an excuse to not try as hard as you could.” If the client’s response is what Adler called a wry “smile of recognition” that implies, “You caught me!” the therapist suspects he has revealed a piece of private logic that might be dear to the client’s heart and used quite often. The therapist’s purpose is not to play “Gotcha!” (which would feed the client’s sense of inferiority, but to explain to the client how this private reasoning justifies the style of living that, at least in part, the client has come into therapy to change.

**Family Constellation**

The human being does not appear fully formed, but begins with the joining of two life forces, a gestation period of some nine months, and expulsion into a world of light and color and noise and hunger and thirst and all the rest. One thing the human being is not, yet, is a human being. At least not in any sense that we recognize as human (except perhaps as a cute little bundle of joy, but that’s something else).

Human beings are not born, they are made. They are created by other human beings in a slow process of maturation. And so the newborn enters the world into a family, the earliest example of the human community that defines what and when a human being is. We call it “the family constellation.” It has at least three important aspects:

1. **Sibling position** is one’s situation among siblings by order of birth and by psycho-social definitions.

   Several thousand studies of sibling position support Adler’s early reasoning on this topic. Numerical order of birth, while important, is seen to give way to the shaping influences of other factors: innate intelligence, whether a child is wanted, spoiled, abused or neglected, etc., the influence of the sex of each sibling, the parental preferences for sons or daughters, which parent the child most or least resembles, behaviors and attitudes of siblings among each other, parental comparisons between children, a child’s special gifts or talents, special problems such as handicaps or retardation, even the name the child is given (e.g., that of a rich and favorite relative, for example).

2. **Parental examples** are important as the young child seeks to understand what it means to be “a grown-up.” So the child pays attention to parental models of adult roles: male and female, mother & father, husband & wife, etc. Imitation of these roles in play and imagination becomes the foundation for adult self-definitions and relationships.

   Meadian role theorists as well as researchers in marriage and family have confirmed Adler’s assertions that how a child perceives parental behavior in adult roles is a major influence on how the eventual adult will adopt, adapt, accept, or reject those same roles for the self. (See the article on “Meadian Role Theory” that comes with LEAP.)

3. **Family atmosphere** includes family social status, self-views, emotional climate, life in the home, correct behavior, etc. What is learned in the family is central to later self-image, relationships, work, marital choices, parenting, moral behavior, and how one pursues one’s goals.

   This is a key point in Adler’s understanding of the formation of the child personality. Again, family sociologists as well as cultural anthropologists have noted the influence of the family setting on the child and later adult. Among such influences are family stories, “place” at the family table, waking and bed-time rituals, family likes and dislikes, the family’s emotional climate (serious, fun-loving, pleasure-seeking, goal-oriented, etc.), celebrations of key events (birthdays, anniversaries) and holidays; vacations, hobbies, and spare time; etc.

**Social Embedded ness**

From birth onward, a person is part of a social setting whose influences and responsibilities cannot be avoided. Society, experienced first as the family, insists on certain beliefs, actions, attitudes, etc. A person is as much a creation of social setting as of personal choice or genetic design. Adler said this influence is so strong and basic that he called it “The Iron Law of Communal Life.” Society’s demands are transmitted through games, friendship groups, fairy tales,
rules, customs, folk sayings, religion, school, and more. That the community is a key in shaping the individual is central to Individual Psychology. It became so much a part of basic thinking that it quickly came to be assumed by others, including “neo-Freudians.” Consider the following, which one would assume speaks of Adler’s pioneering influence on social psychiatry:

This book provides a systematic presentation of the later thinking of the psychiatrist who, perhaps more than any other, pushed psychiatry toward a keener recognition of social factors in mental health and mental disease. (He) believed in viewing the individual in his relations to other people and to his social setting. Psychiatry became, to him, not the study of mental disorder, but the study of human living.

Yet the book is not about Adler, but is from an introduction to Harry Stack Sullivan’s The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry! The point here is that Adler (“the psychiatrist who, [actually] more than any other, pushed psychiatry toward a keener recognition of social factors in mental health and mental disease”) laid the groundwork in stressing the importance of the shaping influence of the community on individual personality.

So we see that society is the central feature of humanity, the point at which everything that is human comes together: the child (including actuality and potential), the family (including its history, its members – parents, children, other members – its movement through time and its contributions to the community), and all those individuals who, together, form the neighborhood, the town, the state or province, the nation, various languages and skin shades, and finally the one human race. Into this each person is embedded, tied, bound. There is no escape, there can be no avoidance of the responsibilities of the individual to the larger, wider community. It is little wonder, then, that Adler said “all human problems are social problems” and that social problems are by far the greatest number of “disorders” people come to therapy to relieve.

When we say “embeddedness” we mean an analogy similar to a peg in a hole in a board. It is in there tightly; it will stay; it will not come loose. The board is society, the human community whose main task is to create its members. The peg is the person, implanted to be created.

**Life Tasks**

Adler held that each person is called on to successfully perform three major tasks in life: Society (in relationships and community), Work (in one’s contributions to society), and Sex and marriage (including procreation and responsible rearing). He alluded to two others: Self, and One’s Place in the Cosmos, which LEAP divides in two: The world within which we all live and how we get along within it; and the “existential” universe we inhabit with its limits (aging, illness, personal and relationship problems, death) and its mysteries (Why? What is life? What is the meaning of life? Is there a God? Why do good people suffer? Is there life after death?)

Adler noted that “all tasks which are put to the individual are social problems, for which the family is the exercise and training ground.” Thus individual (personal) tasks are in fact social tasks, arising out of the community which sets the standards for successful accomplishment. To behave as a responsible member of society is not a choice but a demand made by the community. To work at an occupation is not a choice but a necessity of the individual to support and keep healthy the social setting. Marriage, sex, and parenting are also not choices in the last analysis, but the insistence of the community that the individual continue the race by having children.

While Adler had very liberal views on many topics, in some ways he was traditional and a product of his times. He saw sex as an activity only within marriage, and then mainly for procreation rather than, for example, recreation. He assumed marriage was the goal of every normal male and female. Homosexuality was viewed as a neurotic avoidance of community responsibility. (Adler’s son, Kurt, when an Adlerian psychiatrist in New York City and president of the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology, said of this position, “That was one of those things about which my father was wrong.”)

Even so, at a time (in the 19-teens and –twenties) when sex role definitions favored men, he asserted the equality of the sexes. He saw work as the way an individual returns something to the community which created him, or in the case of criminal activity, takes something away. Essentially, to Adler, there was nothing about the individual life that could not be connected as “life tasks” necessary to complete as part of the larger community.

**The Law of Movement**

Adler believed the concept of Movement was his greatest contribution to understanding personality. He saw movement as the growing of the person through the years from childhood to old age, as one’s progress along a guiding line from childhood’s Problem to childhood’s hoped-for solution. He saw movement in family life, in marriage, in parenting, in one’s occupation, in one’s good works for others. He wrote:
Everyone carries within himself an opinion of himself and the problems of life, and a law of movement which keeps fast hold of him without his understanding it or giving himself an account of it. The law of movement in the mental life of a person is the decisive factor for his individuality. The declaration of this law was actually the strongest step Individual Psychology has taken. We have always maintained the view that all is movement.

Movement through life may be thought of as proceeding along a guiding line leading toward one’s ultimate guiding goal. All events, thoughts, and actions describe that line and are oriented to it. Dreikurs said that, by connecting important life events, a person’s goal and direction can be plotted “like points on a line.” Or Adler himself said, ‘We can never know what actions will characterize a man if we know only whence he come. But if we know whither he is going we can prophesy his steps and his movements towards his objective.’

Although all of life is movement, not all movement is useful. Some movements may distract the individual’s movement toward worthwhile goals, or move the individual toward goals which are not worthwhile. Adler described “neurotic types of movement” by which individuals prevent their positive forward movement.

Fictional Finalism

Adler believed that, of all a child’s problems, one stands out as so important that one decides I must spend my life to solve this. It is fictional because a child is in no position to judge life’s real problems; and it is final because to solve it becomes the ultimate goal of life. Adler held that people arrange their lives to justify and enable their fictional, final goal, or what he earlier (in The Neurotic Constitution, 1912) called the guiding self-ideal.

The development of the mental life is accomplished with the help of a fictional teleology through the proposing of a certain end under the pressure of a teleological apperception. The goal of the mental life becomes its governing principle, its final cause, [its end result, its reason for being]. Here we have the root of the unity of personality, the individuality. It does not matter what the source of its energies may have been. Not their origin but their end, their ultimate goal, constitutes their individual character.

Part of Adlerian therapy is to reveal the goal so it can be revised and result in a more satisfying line of movement. LEAP uses the term Mistaken Mission. The image is of a journey toward an idealized solution to the childhood problem. On this mission, unrelated issues take second place. With Adler, specific activities are associated with this Mission: education, career, marriage, parenting, religious and political activities, etc. The purpose is to bring one nearer to the goal where the Problem is solved.

Life Style

This is the largest concept in Individual Psychology, and probably in all of psychology. It represents the sum of an individual’s basic approach to life, the unified and self-consistent pattern of beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, relationships, and actions which make up the total person. Adlerians use it to refer to the central core of a person’s life, who this person is, past, present, and future, who seeks such-and-such final goal. Because the term is used in other ways today, the LEAP approach uses LifeCourse, summarized in ten Patterns (a term Adler used for Life Style) which are created in childhood and carried into adult life.

Social Interest/Fellow Feeling

Adler believed that community involvement, helping, and kindness are crucial to individual as well as social health. He spoke of the ability to see from the other’s viewpoint (empathy), to contribute through work and volunteerism, to cooperate in solving community problems, etc., and compared his psychological approach with the Golden Rule. Adlerians see Social Interest as a measure of maturity and evidence that one has succeeded in the Tasks of Life, and Adlerian therapists see increased social interests in patients as a sign of therapeutic improvement.

Adler connected social interest with striving for social perfection, which is a goal that can be sought individually and collectively, by the individual and the community. He saw it as a cornerstone and main pillar of his entire system. In 1933 he said to the Vienna Medical Association:

Particularly, it means feeling with the whole, a striving for a form of community which must be thought of as everlasting, as it could be thought of if mankind had reached the goal of perfection. It is [not a specific] community or society [or] political or religious form. The goal best suited for perfection would have to be a goal which signifies the ideal community of all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of evolution. We conceive this idea as the ultimate form of mankind in which we imagine all questions of life, all relationship to the external world as solved. It is an ideal, a direction-giving goal. This goal of perfection must contain the goal of the ideal community, because everything we find valuable in life, what exists and what will remain, is forever a product of this social feeling.
In some ways, this seems to be a Fictional, Final Goal, an unattainable ideal, perfectionism on the order of Sir Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* (1516). Yet it is also an idea and ideal with a long history and deep roots in humankind’s major religions and philosophies. For the individual, it is seen in terms of altruism, caring, working together, and cooperating toward common goals, volunteerism, the “tit for tat” of the Golden Rule, and general mental health.

**Additional Adlerian Concepts**

**Acting As if**

Hans Vaihinger’s “philosophy of as if thinking” gave substance to Adler’s own idea of fictional finalism. He cited *The Philosophy of As If* (1911) nine times in *The Neurotic Constitution* (1912). The Ansbachers defined it like this:

> Fictions ... are ideas, including unconscious notions, which have no counterpart in reality, yet serve the useful function of enabling us to deal with it better than we could otherwise. The statement “all men are created equal” is a useful ideal but [not a reality. Yet we state it and believe it “as if it were true.”] ... The main influence of Vaihinger on Adler was to provide him with a philosophic foundation for his subjective finalism.

Adler credited Vaihinger with philosophical ideas he then applied to psychology and psychotherapy. He saw the approach in the myths, fables, stories, legends, and other literary comparisons (metaphors, analogies, similes, satires, allegories) that (while not factual) make for convenient ways to think about life. Thus it was possible for the Founding Fathers to speak *as if* this was the land of the free...while ignoring slaves, women, Indians, and non-land-owners.

Adler saw that fictions (contradictory, paradoxical, or non-provable ideas) play a part in how we approach experiences. Although we can’t prove that God exists, we think and perhaps act *as if* he does. The same is true of atomic particles, which we cannot see but think *as if* they exist and, by thinking thus, can create theories and experiments to study them. And the same is true of ideas, such as love: while we can’t prove they exist, by acting *as if* they do, we are better able to get along in our world, and seem to create the very thing we act sometimes irrationally about!

> “As if” thinking can also get us in trouble by providing support for mistaken thinking. Adlerian psychology gives many examples: In childhood we create fictions about ourselves as inferior, or our position among our siblings, or an “imaginary friend” with whom we speak in secret and who becomes, later, God or Jesus to whom we pray, or Santa Claus to whom we write letters asking for toys at Christmas.

> “As if” thinking may sometimes lie beneath neurotic behaviors, the Private Logic supporting me-first attitudes, and the fictional final goal, as well as our ideals, best hopes, social interest, and positive relationships.

Adlerians use this in several ways.

1. By Private Logic we act *as if* our behavior is reasonable, when in fact it is only an excuse for doing what we want by justifying self-oriented thoughts, feelings, or actions.
2. *Acting As If* is a way to rehearse what it would be like to behave in a different way. Adler used *role-playing* early on, to help clients practice new behaviors in the consulting room which they could then try out in their lives. Children do this in play, when they pretend to be someone else in order to sense what it would be like to be them. It is also a way to describe behavior that is fictive and assumes that “to behave this way”
3. *As-If thinking* is related to Adler’s concept of *fictional-finalism*, the idea that one’s entire life is be oriented around the child’s belief that one Problem is The Main Problem in life, and that to solve it is the only goal for a lifetime.

Adler used the *as if* method to reframe the client’s mental images, asking, in effect, “But imagine if *this* were true, instead of *that.*” This would involve a mental “acting as if” rather than a physical one.

**Antithetical Apperception**

We’ve said, we perceive subjectively, emotionally “seeing” what we prefer to see rather than what is. We think, we feel, we act personally; we view our world mainly for how it affects us. We explain things for their meaning *to us*. Things are explained by what they mean *to us*. Such meaning becomes our belief which become our Personal Truth.

But too often our thinking, believing, *truth* is mistaken...or at least based on mistakes in reasoning and logic. One way we do this, Adler identified as *antithetical*. That is, we give ourselves only two options: good or bad, happy or sad, perfectly successful, or a terrible failure, incredibly good looking or horribly ugly. The result of such thinking can easily be *catastrophic* thinking, as we pit perfection against the worst that can happen. Such thinking says, “If I’m not a complete winner, I must be a total loser” or “Since I’m not stunningly beautiful, I must be awfully ugly” or “If I don’t succeed at everything I do, I am a failure.” Adler said:
The neurotically disposed person has a...strongly abstracted mode of apperception. He groups events according to a strictly antithetical schema of two opposites, like debit and credit sides in bookkeeping. He becomes estranged from reality where elasticity is required.

This is a form of mistaken thinking that stresses only one extreme or the other. Such thinking justifies such self-statement (winner-or- loser) which leave no room for anything in between. Such thinking influences one’s general view of the world (“only the worst things can happen”), one’s sense of place in the world (“I don’t belong; I must be an alien from another planet”), and the terms one uses to describe strangers (“They aren’t like me; they can hurt me if I don’t watch out.”), groups (“Why don’t they speak English? Are they plotting against me in secret?”), events (“That earthquake was a sign that everything I fear is true!”) Thinking in only extremes can be used to justify everything from incapability and laziness to racial hatreds and social stereotypes.

Compensation and Over-compensation

Adler saw many clients whose actions seemed bizarre or disordered on one level, but could be seen to make sense on another level...the level of trying to stay upright in a topsy-turvy in life that kept trying to push one down.

- The woman who is narrowly defined by a male-dominated society (and not allowed to work at a meaningful job, or to vote, or to think for herself) exercises her “masculine protest” by having trouble hearing, seeing, feeling, or other forms of hysteria.
- A neurotic exhibits behaviors that seem odd or inappropriate to others, but make sensedto the neurotic as a way to gain something that he could not otherwise have.
- A young student feels inferior to others who have greater success or possessions or school grades, and takes it out on them by bullying, beating them up, stealing from them, calling them names, and other things to show they can at least dominate in some other area.
- The younger brother sees that the older one has made his mark in sports, so there is no sense in challenging him there. The younger one sees that academics are an open field, however, and works hard to make his mark there! (And the middle one, seeing both athletics and academics are taken, makes his mark by achievements in music or dram or art.)

In these and many other ways one person compensates to “even things up” or perhaps to “go ahead” in the various contests of life. Adler introduced the term “compensation” to the field of psychology to suggest this balancing act. (And over-compensation to indicate when a person exaggerates behaviors in order to show dominance, power, or control over the competitor.)

It is hardly any wonder, then, that a child who has competed to compensate for “being down” (and who has experienced thereby “going up”), will carry the process over into adult situations: marriage, friendships, and especially the work place. There, differences of advantage are common (signified by titles, salaries, office, etc.) and pressures to get ahead can be great. Many a man (and woman) has commented on how alike school and workplace are, with someone to judge, praise, or condemn your efforts compared with others.

Freud borrowed this concept from Adler, and used it as one of his “ego defense mechanisms.” Adler used it to explain behaviors aimed at overcoming inferiority: to compensate was to restore balance by making up in one area what was lacking in another. Origins of compensatory behaviors are in the self-ratings of “minus” which arise from being negatively compared with others. A child who cannot make up enough loss or lack by positive compensation and cannot satisfy the high demands of others, may decide to become “the best at being worst” (the best juvenile delinquent, the best arsonist, the best car thief, the best schoolyard bully, etc.).

Over-compensation is exaggerated behavior aimed at becoming not merely equal, but superior in a situation of imbalance. The person no longer seeks to “catch up” or “get even” but to “get ahead” and prove that one is ahead and above others. Sometimes it appears that this is based on an internal drive for perfection, to better oneself, to gain an imagined ideal. Yet too often it is discovered that the opposite is the case. The person is not running toward but running away; fears the future rather than hoping in it.

For example, in trying to Belong in the family, a child may seek attention by reasonable, acceptable means. If unsuccessful, the child may turn to unreasonable, unacceptable means: being noisy, picking on others, etc.. These exaggerated behaviors may seem to say, “Look at me!” or even “Look out for me!” when in reality the child within is saying, “Please help me; I am incompetent, un-noticed, invisible.” Unless such a child can be helped in significant ways early, this will have
Complexes

Adler said complexes serve Life Style movement toward the Ideal Goal. Everyone has such patterns of thought, behavior, and attitude; they are universal to the process of goal-seeking: “There is no person whose attitudes cannot be resolved into complexes.” He described several complexes, which I have defined briefly below:

Oedipus Complex: (Freud’s complex). Freud said a boy of three or so desires his mother sexually and fears that his father would cut off his penis as punishment (castration anxiety). Adler said the proper interpretation is that the child has been pampered by the mother and does not want to give her up, “an error in upbringing.”

Redeemer Complex: Some people believe their life task is to “save” others from their mistaken or sinful ways. As Adler said, they are “those who take an attitude that they must save or redeem somebody, finding superiority in the success of solving the complications of others.” They gain superiority by solving the problems of others. They think they are chosen by God to cure the ills of humankind. The Adlerian looks for how this represents a denial of the individual’s own problems, or perhaps a solution to them. Such people often find it hard to successfully manage their own lives, but believe they are perfectly competent to tell other people how to manage theirs. The Individual Psychologist will look for how such an attitude and related activities represent a solution to the individual’s own problems (following the principle of Psychology of Use). Sometimes, of course, the goal of such neurotic behavior is not success but failure, at which point something happens to the “redeemer” that shows even his failures are a success, which is often case with martyrs.

Proof complex: Those who need to prove they have a right to exist by having no faults, and allowing no faults in others. Their underlying fear of committing errors leads them to seek perfection in themselves and those around them (which can make it difficult for the spouses, children, or employees of such people). Their conversation seems to beg for approval. They work hard, play hard, do everything harder than needed in order to show that they are bending every effort. Yet they never seem at peace. Nothing they do satisfies their own high standards, so when they fail (as fail they must!), they appeal to extenuating circumstances which prevent their success. While they may hang their heads in shame at failure, this often does not prevent them from demanding even more of those around them. “If I can’t be perfect, at least I can whip you into shape!”

Polonius Complex: Taken from the conversation between Hamlet and Polonius in Shakespeare’s play:

_Hamlet_: See yonder cloud; ‘tis almost in the shape of a camel.

_William Shakespeare_: Yes, and ‘tis a camel indeed!

Of course a cloud is not a camel. Yet that “something looks like something else” is the basis for projective tests (“the Rorschach inkblots”) and our ability to see meaningful patterns where there are only small dots bunched together. (Look at a newspaper photo under a magnifying glass.) It is also related to “As if” thinking, as well as our tendency to “read things into things,” where we make assumptions to fill in missing information.

Exclusion Complex: Adler says this is “Used as a crutch by the insecure person.” The individual seeks to reduce their sphere of action by removing (“excluding”) all problems. It is used by the person who seeks superiority, yet by the easiest route. In the related maneuver of denial, one pretends there are no problems by saying there are none, and so does not have to deal with them. The mantra here is, “No! This cannot be!”

Predestination Complex: Such persons believe themselves to have been created as special. The rules that apply to others do not apply to them. Others must stop at stop lights; they get to drive right through. Adler said this often results from pampering, where the child is led to believe he or she is “preordained” (usually by doting parents) to a life of superiority. Such a child may think of self as “Prince” or “Princess.” (I have known children called by such royal names as a regular nickname, and one little girl whose name was “Princess.”) Adler suggests a positive side to predestination, in which the individual is self-assured and feels “completely rooted in the facts of this earth, presenting itself as courage.”

Leader Complex: Found among some first-borns and second-borns, for differing reasons, this is the overwhelming need to be in the lead, to win, and never to lose. Adler saw this as a result of childhood choices about where one wants to be with others: a follower, one of the crowd, or a ground-breaker. Such children may become leaders as adults, although the type and results depend on additional circumstances. Examples include explorers, teachers, clergy, public speakers, and others who “stand before” others. (There are some sly ones who see where the crowd is going and rush to the front shouting “follow me!”)
take part in life himself. Such children may grow up to be passive adults who have trouble making decisions and prefer to “just be part of the crowd.” The Adlerian therapist encourages such people to an involvement with others through meaningful volunteering, so they can become participants rather than onlookers.

“No” Complex: Not the absence of a complex but the presence of an attitude in which one seeks confrontation and opposition. “There are people who have a ‘no’ on their lips even before someone has opened his mouth.” Adult examples: negative theater critics and “nay-sayers,” fault-finders, and antagonists.

Consequences

A consequence is the end result of a sequence. Natural consequences happen as a result of living in a natural or a physical world. Logical (or Social) consequences happen in the world of people.

Adlerians speak of natural consequences which result from activities in the physical realm: “Touch a hot stove, get burned.” More important are logical consequences which result from activities in the social realm, and arise from the logic of relationships: “Do unlikeable things, people will avoid you.” Adlerians view activities as problem-solving, so the question becomes how consequences are related to goals: “What you have is what you intended, because if you’d wanted something else, you’d have done something else. Since you did not, what you have must be the result you intended.”

Adlerians use consequences in child-rearing. Natural: The child leaves the table frequently at dinner. Parent removes food and tells child, “You can try again next time.” Social: The child is noisy while family watches TV. Parent gives child two options, both acceptable to the parent: “You may either be quiet while we are watching TV, or you may play in your room by yourself.” Child continues to be noisy. Parent says, “I see you have decided to play in your room.” Parent ushers child to room and says, “You may try again when you are ready to sit quietly with us.”

Courage in striving

To strive with courage is to act with Social Interest when tempted to act on Private Logic. It’s easier to lie than to tell the truth, to go along rather than stand up for what’s right, to wallow in self-pity than to do something constructive, etc. The term also refers to an ability to go beyond one’s limits in order to reach a desired goal, as in overcoming limiting social effects of a physical handicap. Emotional disorder is seen to result from a child’s assumption that life should be easy. Adler knew that life is sometimes hard, and one can either give way before life’s challenges or work to get beyond them to advance in life. So he encouraged his clients to strive against obstacles, and find courage within themselves to go on.

Early Recollection

“Early Recollections” (ER’s) is a specific Adlerian term relating to specific childhood events. They are not general memories of general happenings. They are specific incidents that represent a point at which the person learned something basic about life. They form one’s fundamental approach to life, the life style, and become the recalled framework by which all subsequent similar events are judged. Adlerians ask for a half dozen specific ERs a client can recall from as early in life as possible. Some Adlerians ask for ER’s at various points in therapy, and use changes as marking progress. Thus the diminishing or “forgetting” of some ERs and the strengthening or “remembering” of others suggests therapeutic movement. In contrast with Freud’s view that important memories are re pressed to the Unconscious, Adler believed important early memories are easily recalled because they are central to the Guiding Line and are constantly being used to measure progress in movement toward the Life Goal.

Family Atmosphere

This is the emotional climate of the childhood home, set by the parents and reflected in sibling interactions. It is remembered by the adult as, “This is what my family was like.” It forms the basis for what one expects, desires, fears, or dislikes in one’s own marriage, parenting, and family life. In later years there is a tendency to deny, exaggerate, or minimize aspects of family life to create a kind of “fictive history” which will be consistent with what one wishes the family had been like. Individuals, relationships, and specific events may be radically changed to provide this “better view.” The therapist looks on such changes as adaptations which now support the client’s Guiding Fiction. For example, the often-absent father is transformed into “the man who worked hard to support us,” or the alcoholic mother is changed to a “saint who loved us,” and family poverty is viewed as “building the character needed in a cruel and unfeeling world.”
Felt Minus, Fictional Plus

“Minus” is the position of childhood, in which children are, in fact, less strong, less able, etc., compared with the adults and older siblings. But to grow up feeling minus leads to mistaken thinking, inferiority feelings, and Private Logic. Plus is the goal of striving from a felt minus, seen as ideal mastery or success. Adler said, “The whole of human life proceeds along this great line of action.” The basis for feeling minus is a sense of incompleteness, of being less whole, less capable, less worthy. It is like early childhood’s inferiority feelings. Plus becomes a fictional goal, an ideal future in which one is more whole, more complete, more capable, more worthy, etc., in a word, superior, if not over others, at least over the original life-view.

Gender Guiding Lines

Adler said self-definitions as female or male create a line of movement based on gender roles. Much of this is related to how we experienced our parents in such roles: parental (as mother/father), marital (wife/husband), and sexual (man/woman). The child internalizes sex role definitions and behaviors by accepting some, rejecting others, and changing or adapting still others. A result is the Self-Ideal as a male or female, against performance is measured in adulthood as a man or woman.

Guiding Fiction

The mistaken belief that there is only one way to a goal, and only one action that will attain it. The image is an idealized future of safety, success, or worth. It is fiction because it cannot exist in reality) and guiding because adult life is based on it. One way or another, the last line of this personal fairy tale will be “. . . happily ever after.” This is the fiction that sustains the Guiding Line one takes throughout life, justifying the Guiding Goal and the actions taken to achieve it. Private Logic may justify socially-useless behavior in the Goal’s pursuit, and such attitudes as, “I’ll do what it takes to get ahead,” or “To Hell with anyone who gets in my way!” Such a fictive attitude incorporates the entire fantasy story of one’s life.

Guiding Line

This is the analogous route, path, or road representing the line of movement of life toward the Guiding Goal. Dreikurs suggested that one could take specific events and plot them like points on a graph-line, and thereby trace both the origins of the Life Style in childhood and predict the future course of one’s pursuit of the fictive goal.

The Iron Law of Communal Life

Community pre-exists the Individual and makes absolute demands for a person to be a member of society. Adler called it an Iron Law because no one can escape the community’s shaping influences, and one cannot be said to be a complete human being without also being a responsible member of society. Problems arise when individuals set themselves apart from, or over against, the community. This is the case when Private Logic is used to overrule the community’s Common Sense. With his introduction of Social Interest to his system, Adler believed even more strongly that the individual cannot exist apart from the human community, and has responsibilities to its improvement which cannot be avoided.

Masculine Protest

Freud believed, following Plato, that a woman’s psychological problems result from having a uterus. Hysteria is from the Greek for uterus. Adler, on the other hand, saw many female neuroses as resulting from trying to live in a society which was dominated by male-defined sex-role definitions and expectations. He called this (and its equivalent in males) the masculine protest. Adler was almost alone in his day in stressing sexual equality and that the inequality of dominance makes for poor relationships. One can apply the general principle to other “protests,” from unionism to homosexuality to race relations. In each, one part of society sees some other members as “bad” or “not like the rest of us.” Members of the “out group” respond in various ways to these imposed definitions. While some are neurotic protests, others are attempts to move from a position of inferiority to a position of equality within the community.

Mistaken Thinking
This includes all the ways an individual may think illogically or erroneously through Private Logic, Guiding Fiction, Antithetical Thinking, exaggerations, confusions (of feelings with facts and thoughts with feelings), absolutism, denial, minimizing, over-generalization, etc. Albert Ellis speaks of irrational beliefs, e.g., “I must be loved by everyone for everything I do.” Aaron Beck speaks of automatic thoughts which seem to take over and control the cognitive processes. In this, they follow Adler’s earlier lead of mistaken thinking, the individual’s “apperceptive schema,” and fictional finalism. Behaviorists Dr. Joseph Wolpe and Dr. Arnold Lazarus created an approach (the “4-S Method”) to control mistaken thinking. Ellis provided a helpful list of “erroneous thoughts” which we reproduce here:

### 12 Irrational Ideas That Cause and Sustain Neurosis

1. The idea that it is a dire necessity for adults to be loved by others for almost everything they do -- instead of their concentrating on their own self-respect, on winning approval for practical purposes, and on loving rather than on being loved.
2. The idea that certain acts are awful or wicked, and that people who perform them should be severely damned -- instead of the idea that certain acts are self-defeating or antisocial, and that people who perform such acts are behaving stupidly, ignorantly, or neurotically, and would be better helped to change. People's poor behaviors do not make them rotten individuals.
3. The idea that it is horrible when things are not the way we like them to be -- instead of the idea that it is too bad, that we would better try to change or control bad conditions so that they become more satisfactory, and, if that is not possible, we had better temporarily accept and gracefully lump their existence.
4. The idea that human misery is invariably externally caused and is forced on us by outside people and events -- instead of the idea that neurosis is largely caused by the view that we take of unfortunate conditions.
5. The idea that if something is fearsome we should be terribly upset and endlessly obsess about it -- instead of the idea that one would better frankly face it and render it non-dangerous and, when that is not possible, accept the inevitable.
6. The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face life difficulties and self-responsibilities -- instead of the idea that the so-called easy way is usually much harder in the long run.
7. The idea that we absolutely need something other or stronger or greater than ourselves on which to rely -- instead of the idea that it is better to take the risks of thinking and acting less dependently.
8. The idea that we should be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects -- instead of the idea that we would better do rather than always need to do well and accept ourselves as a quite imperfect creature, who has general human limitations and specific fallibilities.
9. The idea that because something once strongly affected our life, it should indefinitely affect it -- instead of the idea that we can learn from our past experiences but not be overly-attached to or prejudiced by them.
10. The idea that we must have certain and perfect control over things -- instead of the idea that the world is full of probability and chance and that we can still enjoy life despite this.
11. The idea that happiness can be achieved by inertia and inaction and by doing nothing -- instead of the idea that we can be happiest when we are absorbed in creative pursuits, or devoting ourselves to people or projects outside ourselves.
12. The idea that we have no control over our emotions and that we can’t help feeling disturbed about things -- instead of the idea that we have control over our emotions if we choose to work at changing the hypotheses we often use to create them.

Ellis then suggests four questions to keep in mind when considering client examples of such mistaken thinking:
1. Is there any evidence for this belief?
2. What is the evidence against this belief?
3. What is the worst that can happen if you give up this belief?
4. And what is the best that can happen?

### Neurotic types of movement

Adler spoke of three phases of Neurotic movement: mental (seen in the “compulsion neurosis”), emotional (seen in “anxiety”), and motor (physical, seen in “hysteria”). Later (1932) he suggested these four major “types of neurotic movement”:

1. The **distance complex**, in which the individual attempts to safeguard the self by removing themselves emotionally or physically from a threatening situation or problem by, for example, fainting, indecision, over-doubting, etc.
2. The **hesitating attitude** in which advances are made hesitatingly in a sort of “stutter-step” manner, where tentative actions are countered by periods of fatigue, postponement, paralyzing phobic reactions, etc.
3. The **detour** moves the neurotic around the problem (side-stepping it, as if it doesn’t exist) or to another arena of lesser importance, where solutions may be simpler. (One is reminded of the story of the man on his hands and knees under street light, looking for something. A passerby says, “Lose something?” The man say, “Yes, over there.” The passerby asks, “Then why are you looking over here?” the man responds, “Because the light is better over here.” Or of the woman who, rather than think about her husband’s infidelity, decides to have her hair done instead.)
4. The narrowed path of approach. The individual accepts only a narrow part of the over-all solution to a problem, perhaps Yes-but-ing unacceptable parts which are often the most pertinent to the solution. Adler said such a narrowed focus may also result in great achievements, where focus and clarity of vision are important.

Orientation (lines of, or “fixed points” of)

Adler frequently spoke of “lines of orientation” or “fixed points” when discussing the individual’s movements through life. They are seen as points at which the person feels some security, as in “At least this is true.” (Compare them with our use of Beliefs in the LEAP approach.) Typical is adult memories of childhood, in which certain events (“early recollections”) are immovable. Likewise, certain decisions made in childhood (e.g., “I am such-and-such kind of person, and always will be”) are fixed points to serve as ways to judge one’s progress in moving from the minus to the plus side of life.

Overburdening Situations

Adler believed certain childhood circumstances carry such weight that they lead almost directly to discouragement and inadequate preparation for life. They include physical or mental inferiority or handicap; neglect; abuse; being pampered, unwanted or abandoned. When the child cannot find socially useful responses, development is restricted and the likelihood of anti-social behavior is increased. In discussing this topic in a 1930 lecture at Columbia University, Adler said such children, “Are likely to make mistakes in their pattern of life,” another term Adler used for Life Style. Adler’s list is incomplete, especially when compared with today: parents with drug and alcohol abuse problems, sexual abuse, bullying, etc.

Personal Frameworks; Perceptual Schema

We control our perception by placing experiences of events within frames of previous reference, comparing the new or unknown with the familiar or known, and fitting them into our previous knowledge and beliefs. Such frames can lead to the mistaken thoughts and to beliefs on which mistaken actions are based, as in the case of Private Logic. Reframing as a therapeutic tool helps clients to revise their perceptual schemes by using new or different words to describe their experience, and to act as if these other descriptions are true. This apperception schema is the individual’s way of organizing perceptions by viewing objective reality through the subjective filters, in order to “see what we want to see” (or “not see what we don’t want to see”). A result is the personal truth we believe is true, whether it is or not, and on which we base our actions.

Personal Truth; Belief

Adler held that, as we experience events, we create mental descriptions of them and what they mean to us, becoming the basis for what we do as a result: a feeling, thought, action, or combination. Similar perceptions cohere around common themes, becoming patterns of Personal Truth. It does not matter that such Truth may not be factual. Personal Truth needs to have little connection with objective reality for us to act “as if it is so.” While this is well-understood today, it took Adler to place it at the center of the understanding and treatment of emotional disorders. As individual

Beliefs become basic to personality, they become “who one is.” Without them the person would be someone else. Personal Truth is to personality what skeleton, skin, and flesh are to the physical body.
**Personality; Character**

Adler distinguished between the two. He said that personality is who a person is, and character is one’s personality as it is revealed to others through social interaction and behavior. Thus character is the social expression of personality, and when we say that someone has “character” we speak of the integration of the inward and outward into a unity. And thus “integrity” is a way to acknowledge this integration.

**The Problem**

Adler held that, for each person, a problem occurs that a child cannot solve with a child’s limited knowledge, skills, or experience. The child decides that solving The Problem must wait until adulthood and be solved by the adult the child will become. Thus solving *The Problem* of the child becomes the basis for the adult’s Fictional Final Goal, including the Guiding Goal and Guiding Lines. It shapes the entire Life Style, giving it coherence and self-consistency by shaping everything else to it.

**The Prototype**

Especially in his 1929 book *The Science of Living*, Adler stressed the idea that, in the first few years of life, the child creates a prototype which becomes the basis for all that comes later. “When the prototype – that early personality which embodies the goal – is formed, the line of direction is established and the individual becomes definitely oriented. It is this fact which enables us to predict what will happen later in life.”
Psychology of Use

Adler viewed all behaviors (thought, feelings, actions) as useful in the service of gaining goals. All behavior has a purpose, and therefore a person’s psychological symptom has a “use” in that person’s life situation. This general view arose from his specific consideration of symptoms: the kind and strength of a symptom, the goal or “usefulness” of the symptom, its place within the client’s neurotic structure, the specific behaviors associated with the symptom, etc.

This contrasts with the then-prevalent (and today, still dominant) concept of Psychology of Possession, in which a person “possesses” or “has” a symptom or mental disorder that can be given a diagnostic label. Thus a person may “be depressed” (by some outside circumstance or situation) or “have depression” (a diagnostic label). Adlerians would say, on the other hand, that the client has created or chosen depression and its associated behaviors in the service of a larger goal (such as pity, control, relief of responsibility, etc.).

Safeguarding Behaviors

Adler said, “All neurotic symptoms have as their object to safeguard self-esteem and the life style the person has created. To prove his ability to cope, the patient creates neurotic symptoms as an expedient.”

The interpretation of the origins of neurotic symptoms as well as their definitions and treatment, was a major disagreement between Freud and Adler. This led to the debates of 1911 and to Adler and others leaving Freud’s circle. 15 years later, Freud said, “all symptoms are a form of defense” and called them “defense mechanisms” which protected the self from the internal demands of the instincts. Alternatively, Adler said such safeguards protected the Self from external threats in the social system: relationships, society, etc.

“Safeguarding behaviors” are often mistaken responses to threats to the self-esteem, based on mistaken thinking. Adler said by standing-in-place, hesitating, retreating, or creating obstacles, a person can maintain a precarious psychological position rather than move forward. Such behavior may help a person to feel temporarily safe until better or more adaptive responses are learned. Making a habit of them (the “Yes-But” personality) is the opposite of striving with courage. Adler developed this approach as an alternative to Freud’s concept of ego-defense mechanisms. He viewed certain safe-guarding behaviors as strategically useful in maintaining a position of relative security until other, better behaviors can be developed.

Self Ideal

The existential question is “Who am I?” The answer to such a question arises from the work the individual has done since birth to create himself as a unique person. How the person describes himself to himself becomes the “self image.” The image itself is composed of various ways of self-description: self-worth, self-confidence, self-ability, and so on. Above all
is the Ideal Self (or “Ego Ideal”), which is the theoretical best that a person could be if he tried hard enough, had the right resources, and the world would cooperate. The Self Ideal is one’s mental image of Self as Victorious, successful, superior. It is the Fictive Goal expressed in personal terms: “When I win, I will be a Winner!” Life Style is organized around the mental portrait of Self as Perfect.

Over the years, beginning in early childhood, the person also creates other ideal images to compare with reality. There are the Ideal Partner, Ideal male or female, Ideal Marriage, Ideal Child, Ideal Job, and so on up to Ideal World. Such images continue to hang on the walls of one’s mind as if on display in an art gallery, to define, limit, encourage, and disappoint (sometimes all at the same time!)

Ideals can never match reality. One’s partner rarely lives up to the mental image of Perfect Partner. One’s child rarely behaves perfectly. I have several options when disappointed with the comparisons: I can lower my standards, but while some might say I am aligning with reality, inside I think I am giving in. I can try to change the other person by complaining, punishing, offering suggestions, etc. but the other person is likely to resent it. I can accept that I want more than I have, and treat the present situation as a place-holder, a temporary person or thing until something better comes along. And of course I can, in some cases (not my children) replace the one that disappoints with one that comes closer to my ideal. I can find a person who will substitute for my partner, look for another job, etc.

Self-Talk

This involves our carrying on internal conversation, “talking to ourselves,” etc. This isn’t an Adlerian concept; Albert Ellis used the term a lot for “thinking,” or the mental sentences we speak inside our minds. The idea extends Adler’s observation that behavior results from cognition (we act based on what we think). The ability to “talk with ourselves” makes many things possible: awareness and self-awareness, learning from experience, memory of past solutions and their application to present problems, the abilities to envision alternate futures, change our minds, debate ourselves about false thoughts, practice statements we can make to others, and more. This is the basis for the Self and the unique self-awareness that makes us human.

Socially Useful/Socially Useless Behavior

Individuals are born into families, the first experience with the human community. There they learn behaviors that are self-centered or other-centered. The former are based on what Adler called “private” logic, reasoning, or intelligence. He called such behavior socially useless because they were concerned only with one’s own wants and wishes, and not the good of others, relationships, etc. They weaken rather than strengthen the community. Useless behavior may be a reaction to failures at Belonging in the family or to not having achieved a satisfactory position among siblings. Such experiences amplify inferiority feelings that lead to personal truths based on mistaken thinking.

The latter are based on what he called the common sense, or the wisdom that human beings have accumulated over the centuries about community-enhancing behaviors. This wisdom is found in rules and laws, commandments and etiquette, the morals of fables and the outcomes in fairy tales.
Thus a person’s activities be oriented around self-serving interests and excuses in an anti-social way. Another person’s activities center on responsible actions that build up the community. The choice of which side of life one takes is made early in life, solidified in grade school and again, during adolescence, in high school.

Adlerian therapy tries to move self-oriented clients (which most are, when they first enter therapy) from thinking only about themselves and their psychological pain to thinking and acting in other-centered ways. “Think of something you can do to help others” was a common Adler assignment. Therapists prepare for the objection, “What’s in it for me?” as a sign of private logic and a lack of experience in cooperation. Past history makes movement from useless to useful very difficult, and requires great courage on the part of the client, and patience on the part of the therapist.

**Soft Determinism**

In Adler’s day, heredity and environment were seen as the main shaping influences on personality development. Adler agreed (since they are important determiners) but he also stressed personal creativity and one’s decisions. He believed in a limited free will, as opposed to complete or “hard” determinism. His view was that, despite the power of external forces, choice and creativity enabled “soft” determinism, as seen in the saying, “Life deals the cards, but you must play the hand.”

His focus on individual responsibility differentiated his approach from other schools of psychology and psychotherapy of his day. It is at the heart of Adlerian therapy, as the counselor encourages the client to do what the client has always done: make choices, but now more responsibly based on more information than was available in childhood. Reasonable (“common sense”) choices affirm the social interest of both self and others.

**Yes-But Personality**

This is now a common phrase, usually misunderstood by people who use it as a put-down to others. It is Adler’s example of a hesitating approach to life, lack of commitment, and a failure to take responsibility for one’s behavior. A client may accept the logic behind the therapist’s suggestion for a change (“Yes...”) and reject putting them into action and create many reasons for that (“. . but”). As the popular phrase has it, such a person “won’t get off the dime.”

This is the case with neurotic behavior explained by the psychology of use. The person sees the reasoning of an alternative on the one hand, and the usefulness of the behavior on the other. “Yes, I know I should do as you suggest” he says “but I’ve been doing this so long it’s become a habit with me. I’d rather remain stuck in what I know than try something I don’t know and might not like. I want the one...but I need the other.”
Please note: This article does not contain footnotes or references for the quotations. However, I have provided an extensive bibliography with the LEAP On-Line material.