

## Psychology on a Page 5: Adler



Adler was a contemporary of Freud, departing with him, like Jung, over the primacy of the sexual drive. All three were drive theorists – believing in innate capacities that were shaped in childhood and which shape our lives – but only Freud focused on the sexual instincts to the relative exclusion of the others.

Adler developed two ideas that are very much in the forefront of commercial applications of psychology: **Lifestyle** and the idea of the *struggle for superiority* (or overcoming inferiority), so prominent in our search for status. Here we can see clear links between our personalities, our ambitions and needs to compensate and the things we buy or seek out.

Expanding on Freud's libido or sexually powered drives, Adler put forward three **life tasks**, where drives to succeed are high: Work, Friendship (society) and Intimacy or love. In pursuit of these tasks we develop a set of convictions about ourselves, others and the world which make up our Lifestyle. So, rather than being a collection of activities, possessions & settings based on preferences, Adler's Lifestyle was shaped by beliefs and principles about the self developed from childhood. It was a scheme for 'ways to live'.

The art of **Lifestyle Analysis** was based on *Early Recollections*, an approach we have used often in gaining insight into participants' motives.

Another interesting aspect of Adler's work focused on attempts to compensate – and often overcompensate – for perceived inferiority. In his early writings Adler called this 'organ inferiority', saying that these perceptions of inferiority always stemmed from some imagined flaw in one's physical make-up. A very early expression of 'Does my bum look big in this?!

The idea of the inferiority complex and the struggle to compensate made Adler famous in the USA where his books easily outsold Freud's for many years and where Adler was something of a celebrity.

Two other ideas that are less well-known parts of Adler's cannon have immense appeal to me. One is the idea that there is not a discrete separation between the conscious and unconscious: that the two are in play, rather like the strange sidedness of a 'Möbius strip' which only has one side, yet has two! I shall return to the idea of the omnipresent unconscious when this series reaches the French psychologist, Jacques Lacan. In my practice it has become apparent that momentary glimpses of the unconscious are frequent once you get people playing, creating and losing themselves in what they are doing – rather than in discussing things in an 'objective' fashion.

The other idea which I love – and which we have fully incorporated in our methods is that movement and consciousness are parts of the same system. That our thoughts and movements make up a whole – which sheds light on our motives and direction of movement in life, towards



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or away from things. Thus he saw people as moving both psychologically and physically along their direction in life. We have – foolishly in my view – excluded real physical movement from the general practice of focus groups.

One final Adlerian idea, another worthy of applause, is the *role of encouragement* in success at overcoming inferiority and life's struggles. Rather than a 'filler in of holes' Adler was a builder of capabilities and in this respect a forerunner of today's positive psychology. It's interesting to wonder whether Adler's influence in the US in the early 20th century laid the foundations for today's positive psychology dominated by the ideas of Marty Seligman.

