Adler's Motivational Theory: An Historical Perspective on Belonging and the Fundamental Human Striving

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The question of "what is the basic motivation in Adler's theory?" has been raised over a number of years by Adlerian as well as non-Adlerian psychologists. At face value this may appear to warrant an easy answer. However, careful reading of Adler's own writings provides less than an easy answer, with the consequence that considerable confusion has arisen. The present paper provides a historical overview of the growth of Adler's formulations concerning the fundamental nature of human striving.

One major difficulty with regard to identifying what Adler viewed as the fundamentals of human motivation lies in the fact that Adler used many terms for what in contemporary psychology would refer to the concept of motivation. Terms like "feeling," "urge," "striving," "goal," and "need" were all used, which might confuse the reader. A second difficulty lies in the fact that Adler developed his motivation theory through three identifiable stages. The first stage was less sharply crystallized as a motivation theory and emphasized organ inferiority, while the second (middle) stage emphasized striving for power and superiority as the fundamental human motivation. In the third stage, Adler made it explicit that humans as a species strive to belong and that the goal, dictated by evolution, is to contribute to human welfare. These stages were cited by Dreikurs in his counseling film interview with Tom Allen (1969), and they are further described by Ferguson (1984a, 1984b). Finally, a difficulty lies in

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the fact that in many of his published writings Adler concurrently cited two innate strivings or tendencies. In retrospect, it is clear that between 1920 and 1937 Adler struggled to find an adequate solution which would reconcile and integrate his formulations concerning these two motivational forces. Fortunately, for those of us who are his professional heirs as well as for the historian of psychology, before his death in 1937 he stated his solution in print and described the process of his efforts.

Formulations in the Middle Years: The Will to Power and Striving for Superiority

An early example of the way Adler described the basic human motivation comes from a 1920 lecture contained in a 1923 book (Adler, 1923/1971). In *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology* (p. 342), he indicated that "every child" craves "*power and importance*" (italics are Adler's) and that the young would-be hero "represents but a special case of the power that all wish to have." However, in that same paragraph Adler spoke of the importance of treating the child as an equal: "It is one of the most important principles in any educational system to take the child seriously, to regard him as an equal and not to humiliate and make fun of him" (p. 342, Adler, 1923/1971). Thus, assertion of the necessity of social equality is already evident by 1920, even though "the will to power" as the basic human motivation had not yet been repudiated.

A clear historical turning point occurred in the late 1920s. In *The Education of Children*, first published in 1930, Adler (1930/1970) moved from the universal striving for power to consideration of two basic motivations, which at face value were mutually contradictory. It is clear that Adler recognized the contradiction between what he considered to be the two basic motivations: the striving for superiority and the striving for community embeddedness or social belonging, that in 1930 (in the translation) is called "social feeling." Adler posited the two fundamental motivational forces in this crucial 1930 book, but recognizing their dualism and contradiction, he attempted a reconciliation by subsuming both under what he called a "desire for affirmation." To illustrate, in the third chapter of *The Education of Children*, Adler stated: "Next to the unity of personality the most important psychological fact about human nature is the striving for superiority and success" (p. 36). Adler posited this as part of human nature and tied it to his focus on inferiority feeling. He stated that striving for superiority is "directly related to the feeling of inferiority" (p. 36) as a means of removing that feeling. Still assuming the universal necessity for that feeling, he indicated: "if we did not feel inferior we should not have any desire to go beyond the immediate situation" (p. 36). Nevertheless,

after asking if the striving for superiority is innate, like biological instincts, he answered: "This is a highly improbable supposition" (p. 36).

Further in that same 1930 book, Adler discussed what in the translation is called "social feeling." He described it as a tendency for people "to unite themselves with other human beings, to accomplish their tasks in cooperation with others" (p. 115), and to be socially useful. Asking what the source of this feeling is, he answered that it is "a phenomenon that is indissolubly connected with the very notion of man" (p. 115). Realizing that social feeling is radically distinct from striving for superiority, he asked, "in what sense such a psychological sentiment is more innate than the psychological striving for superiority" (p. 115) and concluded "that the individualistic desire for supremacy and the feeling of social-mindedness rest on the same basis in human nature" (p. 116). Both, he said "are expressions of a root desire for affirmation" (p. 116). That is, he considered striving for superiority to be a "dynamic urge to assert one's self" (p. 37) and belonging with other humans to be necessary for survival of the human species, and in that sense to be a "root desire for affirmation" (p. 116).

He expounded on the contradiction between these two motivational tendencies. He noted that social feeling represents a view that the human is dependent on the group, while "striving for supremacy" (p. 116) represents the view that the "individual can do without the group."

Adler reconciled this opposition of strivings that are based on contrasting perspectives by placing the social striving, for uniting with others and for cooperation, as dominant. Humans have always lived in groups, and "there is no doubt that the social feeling is superior to the individualistic striving" (p. 116). The latter is a "superficial viewpoint," although frequently manifested.

In *The Education of Children* Adler made clear the direction of his evolving theory by considering the concept of human striving from a species perspective. That is, humans as a species need the group to survive. Social life and cooperation permit compensation for individual weakness. Through group cooperation not only humans, but even monkeys, by means of massing their strength "more than make up for the weakness of each member of the group" (p. 117). The human child, born helpless, needs the protection of the parents. It is only through such protection that the human race survives and "overcoming of the child's immaturity can only be had by relying on the group" (p. 119). All education of children must always be directed to "community life and social adjustment to it" (p. 119). Finally, "all development of a human being's abilities take place under the pressure of social life and the direction of social feeling" (pp. 119–120). Language, logic, mathematics, art, to name just some major human endeavors, result from community life. Although in "our present civilization" children desire "individualistic supremacy" (p. 125)

and this results in insufficient development of social feeling, Adler pointed out that through proper education of children, full development of social feeling is possible.

Several conclusions summarize Adler's formulations by the end of the middle period. First, it is clear that Adler realized the contrary nature of two opposing motivational forces: (a) individualistic striving for social superiority *over* others, which represents a vertical social striving of placing oneself above others, and (b) social embeddedness and social bonding of individuals *with* others, which represents a horizontal social striving with one's social equals. Second, Adler placed social bonding as more fundamental for humans than the individualistic striving, by stating (Adler, 1930, p. 116) "there is no doubt that the social feeling is superior to the individualistic striving."

Formulations in the Last Years

By the 1930s Adler came to recognize that feeling inferior to others and striving to be superior to others is neither an inevitable nor a fundamental condition of human beings but is, rather, a result of mistaken attitudes and upbringing. Thus, significant shifts occurred in his formulations. First, he shifted from striving for individualistic supremacy to the fundamental motivation of human beings to belong: to bond with others, to feel worthwhile as a social being, and to be part of the human community. Second, he shifted his meaning regarding superiority, from an emphasis on social superiority to one of task superiority. Although in his last years Adler placed far less emphasis on striving for superiority and perfection than he did in his earlier years, when he did refer to such striving it was in terms of tasks and not other persons. For example, in *What Life Should Mean to You*, Adler (1931/1958) indicated that no one can reach a "final goal of superiority, of being complete master of his environment" (p. 56). Such reference to the environment refers to obstacles, situations, and tasks, not superiority over other persons. In the 1930s, Adler also spoke of striving for "perfection" in that same sense—that of overcoming obstacles for accomplishment. Adler was strongly influenced by Spinoza in this, and as pointed out by Ferguson (1984b, p. 138), "the Latin word *perficere* was translated as "perfect" in the writings of Spinoza and actually meant both *perfect* and *accomplish*."[1] When Adler in the last years wrote that individuals strive for perfection and superiority, he meant accomplishments, growth, development, mastery over circumstances and tasks, not over other persons. Even more notably, the emphasis on striving for accomplishment was increasingly on the accomplishments of the human society as a whole, and not just of the individual. Improving the human condition

and raising the welfare of the group, rather than just overcoming individual obstacles, became more emphasized.

Illustrations abound regarding the first shift, that the fundamental motivation of human beings is to belong. In *The Problem Child*, Adler stated "solutions are found to be correct only if beneficial to the community" and "what we call interest in the community is only one aspect of the close bond with others" (1930/1963, pp. ix–x). The value of the community is made very clear in the following: "The feeling of worth . . . stems from a close bond with the community of man" (p. x). Furthermore, "man . . . if left to himself, could certainly not have managed to survive . . . we can find no evidence of an individual living alone. There has always been the law of the community" (p. x). It is clear that in his last years Adler stressed that to be human is to be social. To bond with others, to feel belonging, to feel a sense of worth through one's social embeddedness, is the essence of being human.

Related to this shift, which emphasized the fact that no human can survive alone, was his conclusion concerning the smallness of the child. In earlier writings, Adler assumed that because the child is small compared to other persons, the child feels social inferiority which, in turn, leads to compensatory strivings for social superiority. In his last years, Adler emphasized instead that the child's smallness heightens social bonding and interdependence. Through group cooperation and a shared sense of community, the child in its smallness becomes integrated into the social fabric of humanity. Thus, in *The Problem Child*, Adler states: "The mother's first function is to awaken a sense of social feeling in the child by giving him the impression of a fellow human being" (1930/1963, p. 167). Furthermore, "For every solution of a problem a developed social feeling is necessary" (p. 169).

A third shift in Adler's last years concerns inferiority feelings. When in earlier years Adler wrote of feeling inferior, just as with his formulations about superiority strivings, he did not firmly distinguish social from task considerations. In earlier years he spoke of inferiority feelings as intrinsic to the human condition, and considered this in relation to other persons (social) as well as tasks and life circumstances. In the last years, which emphasized the need for human bonding, he recognized that the feeling of social inferiority reflects a lack in one's sense of worth and adequacy, and that this differs from more transient feelings of inferiority about a given task or situation.

He emphasized increasingly that inferiority feelings (social) can be avoided with proper child training. Adler's associates gave voice to such a view by 1930. This was illustrated in the writings of Oskar Spiel and Ferdinand Birnbaum in a chapter titled "The School and Educational Guidance" published in a book by Adler (1930). These colleagues of Adler

spoke of the fact that the child "realizes the significance of the fictitious goal of superiority" (p. 74) and that "we must make (the child) immune to feelings of inferiority" (p. 79) by proper methods of education. The concept that feelings of (social) inferiority can be prevented, and that goals of (social) superiority are fictitious, characterizes the last period of Adler's evolving theory. The point to be noted is that in a competitive society, in which people humiliate and demean each other, inferiority feelings and superiority strivings will be very frequent, even commonplace. However, society, and methods of human relations, can be changed. In his last writings, Adler increasingly focused on this theme.

Finally, a fourth shift was that for Adler in the later years the need to belong and bond with others as the fundamental human motivation became linked to the goal of contribution. Just as earlier, feeling inferior was linked to striving for superiority, in the later years feeling oneness with one's fellow humans was linked to striving to contribute to human welfare. For Adler, "social feeling" represented two interdependent aspects: one was the need to belong, which he also called the "urge to community," and the other was the goal of contribution. A person with fully developed Gemeinschaftsgefühl (social interest, also sometimes translated as "social feeling") knows he or she belongs and is a worthwhile member of the human community, and such a person strives for contribution and cooperation with fellow humans. Belonging and contribution thus, together, made up the fundamental human motivation under ideal social training and attitudes. Horizontal social striving occurred then. *Mistaken* striving for self elevation over others occurred with feeling social inferiority. The need for the community still existed, but mistaken attitudes and strivings occurred. The perspective that led to this formulation was one that Adler labeled "evolutionary."

In his later years, Adler took an evolutionary, interspecies perspective which differed from his earlier, far more interindividual, intraspecies focus. From an evolutionary perspective, Adler stated that the fundamental human motivation was belonging and participating with others for the common good, but that faulty upbringing would lead a person to a divergent motivational direction. In *The Problem Child*, Adler (1930/1963, p. x) states "To be a man is not merely a figure of speech; it is to be a part of the whole—to feel oneself part of the whole. If so many people are still failing to find this path it is due to their own mistakes." From an evolutionary perspective, problems of the *individual* and of *society* in general have common roots.

The ubiquity of mistaken human relationships that lead to (social) inferiority feelings and compensatory superiority strivings became of increasing concern to Adler. In *The Problem Child*, Adler (1930/1963) showed the common thread underlying pathology at the individual as well as the na-

tional level. Adler pointed out "among mankind there are many injustices. . . . One nation wants to humble another, one family believes it is superior to another" (p. 111) and "I have called . . . attention to the general tendency to depreciate one's neighbor. . . . Persons who travel a great deal have found that human beings are more or less the same everywhere in that they always incline to find some way of belittling others" (p. 111). His conclusion, repeated in print in the 1930s many times, was that mankind can and must change these mistaken patterns. Adler was quite clear on this when he stated, "Until humanity decides to take a step forward in its degree of civilization we must necessarily consider these hostile tendencies not as specific symptoms but as the expression of a general and mistaken human attitude" (p. 112).

In a 1937 article called "Mass Psychology," Adler (1937) described the evolution of his own thinking. According to Adler, "After long-continued study and reflection, I found that one's style of life—acquired in early childhood—is a result of the process of adapting oneself to the evolving structure of one's immediate environment. . . . I was a step nearer the answer . . . I realized that the whole life-process of each person moves in that direction—different for every individual—where it seems to him lies the proper solution of the problems set by our relationship, as social human beings, to the duties of the community" (p. 114). The community sets tasks. Individuals strive for successful solutions and strive to feel worthwhile, and "not, from a sense of inferiority, feel or imagine ourselves to be worthless outcasts from the flow of evolution" (p. 114).

Motivation is in terms of evolution and evolution is in terms of social progress. Adler (1937, p. 114) stated, "Thus the social spirit of our lives pervades the process of development to which evolution compels us." Mistakes may occur in the direction of individual lives as well as mass movements. In a competitive and demeaning environment, the individual may not develop full social feeling, yet this potential lies within every human being. Striving to belong, which Adler called "urge to community" is basic for humans, in spite of the difficulties that are encountered: "Generally it is no easy task for the child to turn the course of his life into the channel of evolution to which the inevitable *urge to community* compels us as the sole way to maintain and advance humanity" (p. 114). (Italics are those of Adler.) Adler was emphatic about the course of evolution and that the goal of human striving was to contribute to the welfare of the human community. He stated, "the course of human evolution . . . leads upward to the welfare of the whole" (p. 116) and "*Activity in the direction of the spirit of the community of mankind is, therefore, the triumphant commandment of human evolution*" (p. 115). (Italics are those of Adler.)

The aims of education and upbringing need to lie in this evolutionary direction. Adler (1937, p. 119) stated, "*It is most important to instill in early*

life the idea of the community of mankind." (Italics are those of Adler.) Moreover, Adler described people who "feel themselves firmly established in the process of evolution" (pp. 118–19) and as individuals, a group, or a nation, they have "*the desire to create their worth and find their sense of importance in their contributions to the welfare of others, of all humanity*" (p. 118). (Italics are those of Adler.)

Thus, in the late 1930s, Adler had come from an early emphasis on organ inferiority, and a later emphasis on striving for power and social superiority, to an evolutionary emphasis that focused on the need to belong and on striving to contribute to human welfare. In so doing, Adler gave psychology a holistic and optimistic theory that integrated individual and group processes, as well as beliefs, attitudes, and motivation.

Reference Notes

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