



Review article

## Adlerian Therapy: A General Review

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### Abstract

Adlerian therapy is a therapeutic approach developed by Alfred Adler on the basis of the theory of individual psychology. Adlerian therapy, which is considered as a neoanalytic approach, differs from other neoanalytic approaches in that it emphasizes the purposefulness of behavior in addition to the individual's past lives and emphasizes subjective opinion. In terms of addressing both the individual's past lives and the motivations underlying their current behavior, Adlerian therapy offers a fairly broad perspective on the individual's personality and behavior. Although research on Adlerian therapy, which has a deep-rooted foundation, is limited in Turkey, given the compatibility of basic concepts with Turkish culture, it is thought that the development and dissemination of Adlerian therapy-based practices will contribute to the field of mental health. For this reason, the article aims to cover the general philosophy and concepts of Adler's theory of individual psychology, its basic concepts, psychopathology view, the process of Adlerian therapy and the techniques used in the therapy process. In addition, the article evaluates the literature findings related to the uses and effectiveness of Adlerian therapy and provides some suggestions to researchers and experts working in the field.

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## **Alfred Adler and The Theory Of Individual Psychology**

Alfred Adler, the founder of the theory of individual psychology, was born in Vienna in 1870 as the third child of a family of seven children. Adler, who could not walk until the age of four due to rickets disease, also came back from a severe pneumonia at the age of five. Adler, who struggled with stuttering for a long time due to discomfort in the vocal cords, had an unhappy childhood (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012). Adler, who considers himself insignificant and ugly, expressed that he was jealous of his older brother, who was constantly appreciated by his mother during those years. Alfred Adler, who was considered a failure by his teachers during school, received a doctor of medicine degree from the University of Vienna in 1895. After his general medical education, Adler studied neurology and psychiatry and became the president of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association in 1911. However, due to the differences of opinion that arose with Freud, he left the association and founded the Association of Individual Psychology and put forward the personality theory called Individual Psychology. While developing the Adler theory, he was greatly inspired by his own difficult childhood life (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012; Schultz & Schultz, 2013).

### **General Philosophy and Concepts of the Theory**

Unlike Freud, Adler believes that the behavior of individuals is influenced not by universal biological and genetic factors, but by the individual's interaction with his social environment, especially the family (Qu, 2022). In other words, according to Adler, each individual's social environment and interaction with this environment has its own unique characteristics and directly affects the individual's behavior. For this reason, the theory has been called the "theory of individual psychology" (Adler, 1964; Schultz & Schultz, 2013). According to the theory, human behavior is influenced by social motives, not sexual motives, and every behavior is purposeful. Therefore, the behavior of individuals is influenced by their life goals as well as past experiences (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012). Adler is the first person to emphasize the role of subjective opinion in psychology. According to Adler, values are the internal determinants of behaviors such as beliefs, attitudes, goals, interests, and the way an individual perceives reality. It is not the events that occur, but the way of interpreting events that shapes personality. An individual can create a new lifestyle by re-consciously interpreting childhood experiences (Adler, 2013; Qu, 2022).

According to Adler, a newborn baby is weak, vulnerable and dependent on others to survive. For this reason, every individual who has just arrived in the world carries feelings of inferiority, vulnerability and inadequacy (Adler, 1964; Rasmussen, 2010). Innate feelings, which Adler calls the *feeling of inferiority*, become a driving force for an individual to achieve success in life and motivate the individual to develop. However, in a negative family environment, the feeling of inferiority can be experienced in a more intense and exaggerated way and turn into an *inferiority complex*. The individual is acting towards transforming himself into self-improvement in order to cope with the feeling of inferiority.

Adler has called this innate tendency to struggle as an striving for superiority (Adler, 1964; Adler, 2013). Although the striving for superiority is a motive that arises in both individual and social dimensions, it helps the individual to become stronger in certain areas, just like the biological compromising mechanism of the body. Some individuals, on the other hand, tend to cover up their own missing or weak aspects by humiliating other people by pretending to be superior in a distorted way. Adler defines this situation as a superiority complex (Adler, 1964; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

While the sense of inferiority and the striving for superiority are universal motives that lead the individual to progress and change, the inferiority complex and superiority complex are psychopathological characteristics that harm the individual and society (Feist & Feist, 2008; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012). According to this approach, psychologically healthy individuals strive to put forward for success that will be beneficial for society, while unhealthy individuals strive only for their own superiority (Adler; 2013; Feist & Feist, 2008). According to Adler, individuals who develop an inferiority complex are children born with a lack of organs, neglected children and spoiled children. Compromise efforts may be insufficient in children born with organ deficiency or persistent diseases, and inferiority complex or superiority complex may emerge by developing a sense of inadequacy (Adler, 1964; Rasmussen, 2010). Since the indifference of parents leads to a feeling of inadequacy in neglected children, these individuals cannot develop a belief in being loved and valued. Spoiled children, on the other hand, expect other people to meet their needs in social life, and when these needs are not met, feelings of anger and inadequacy may develop (Adler, 2013).

*Social (social) interest*, which is one of the concepts that Adler focuses on most in his theory, is defined as the tendency to be closely related to the well-being of other people in society (Adler, 1964; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012). In addition to personality traits such as social interest, hope and optimism, it contains feelings of benevolence, empathy, belonging, cooperation and responsibility towards society (Caprara et al., 2012; Chamarro & Oberst, 2012). According to Adler, social interest is closely related to identification with other people and empathy. The individual's realization that he is a part of society, his attitudes in the relationships he establishes with other people form the basis of social interest. According to Adler, the individual is in need of belonging and is trying to get a place in society to meet this need (Fung & Webster, 2018). The first signs of social interest can be seen in activities such as showing closeness to the baby's environment after one year of age, then sharing the child's toys with friends, helping his parents. Social interest arises as a result of the synthesis of certain innate characteristics with environmental learning (Feist & Feist, 2008; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

In addition to social attention, individuals are expected to take responsibility in three main life tasks throughout life: professional, close relationships and social relationships. How an individual makes choices in these areas and how he/she copes with the challenges he/she faces are also of great importance for the evaluation of mental health (Chamarro & Oberst, 2012).

Adler suggests that these life tasks are not independent of each other, and the way they perform these tasks is related to two dimensions, the level of social interest and activity of the individual. While social interest includes empathy and cooperation towards other people in society, activity expresses the individual's energy to solve life problems. According to these lifestyles, four different personality types emerge: *dominant (ruling) type*, *the leaning type*, *avoidant type* and *socially competent type*. *Dominant type* individuals have high activity levels, low social interests. These individuals only care about their own needs and may engage in aggressive and bullying behavior to others in order to meet these needs. Individuals of the *leaning type* have at least a little social interest, but their degree of activity is low. These individuals are constantly demanding from others and have difficulty solving life problems on their own. Individuals of the *avoidant type* do not have a sufficient level of social interest and activity level. They prefer not to face failure by running away from the problems and life assignments in their lives. Individuals of the *socially competent type*, on the other hand, have a high level of social interest and activity. These individuals develop a sense of closeness and integrity with other people, are willing and courageous about solving life problems. According to Adler, out of the four personality types, only the socially competent type has a positive lifestyle attitude (Adler, 1935, as cited in Bitter & Griffith, 2019; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

According to Adler, the main criterion of mental health is the extent to which an individual acts within the framework of social interest when establishing relationships with others or performing vital tasks (Sweeney, 2009). The foundations of social interest, which has a critical role in the evaluation of an individual's mental health, are largely laid during childhood. However, it is possible to support and develop social interest by creating appropriate living conditions at any time of one's life. According to Adler, if social interest develops, the individual's feelings of inferiority decrease (Fung & Webster, 2018; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

Adler suggested that birth order has an important place in an individual's personality development. According to this view, the first child is in the center of attention of the family, but with the birth of a sibling, he is forced to share this attention. The first child takes on the natural responsibilities of being a big brother while struggling to regain the attention he has lost. The first child, who tends to win the approval of his parents, also exhibits responsible, successful and determined characteristics during his adult years (Corey, 2017; Schultz & Schultz, 2007). The second child has to share the attention with an older and talented sibling from the moment of birth. He can be reactive and rebellious with the belief that he is not as good as his other brother. If he has a younger brother, he can assume a moderate and balancing role because he will move to the position of the middle child. However, the middle child, who can be invisible in the family due to the older brother who is stronger than him and the younger brother who is the center of attention, is described by Adler as 'poor me' (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012; Schultz & Schultz, 2007). The youngest child, because he is the youngest of the family, does not have to share

the attention and is usually spoiled. This condition can cause the youngest child to develop traits of egocentrism and inadequacy. An only child, on the other hand, tends to be overprotected and spoiled by his parents, so he can expect it from his surroundings and behave self-centered in his social relationships. Adler also emphasized the age difference between siblings when considering the birth order and stated that if the age difference between siblings is less or more, only child characteristics can be seen in individuals (Corey, 2017; Yörükoglu, 2003).

One of the basic concepts in Adler's theory is *masculine protest*. According to Adler, in societies where men are glorified and women are not cared about, women may tend to act like men by giving up their feminine characteristics (Corey, 2017). On the other hand, exaggerated aggressive and rowdy behaviors or vice versa feminine behaviors can be observed in men who cannot meet society's gender role expectations. As it can be seen, Adler, unlike Freud, explains the gender roles of men and women not with biological motives, but with social variables (Adler, 2013; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

In contrast to Freud's concept of the ego, Adler introduced the concept of the *creative self*. The concept of self is a highly personalized, subjective system that makes the organism's lives meaningful and clarifies them. The self is in search of being able to add meaning to the individual's life, to provide satisfaction. If he seeks this satisfaction in the outside world but does not find it, he has the power to create and creates it himself. Adler has called this the creative self (Adler, 1935, as cited in Bitter & Griffith, 2019; Adler, 2013). Adler, who stated that an individual's behavior is motivated by expectations and goals for the future rather than the past, used the concept of imaginary goals to define an individual's unique goals and ideals. According to Adler, imaginary goals have a dynamic and flexible structure and can change depending on conditions over time (Rasmussen, 2010).

### **The Process of Adlerian Therapy**

The Adlerian therapy process consists of *four stages*: establishing a therapeutic relationship, revealing the psychological dynamics that guide the client's behavior, giving the client insight into his life, and supporting new choices in the client's life. *At the first stage*, it is essential to listen and understand the client, focus on the client's strengths, and put forth the efforts he makes for change. At this stage, it is important to define the client's goals, establish empathy with the client and encourage change (Corey, 2017; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

*At the second stage*, it is important to understand the client's lifestyle. Adler is doing a lifestyle analysis at this stage. This analysis is based on the examination of the client's family structure, family relationships, early childhood and current life. The therapist examines the client's leisure activities, daily life, and the relationships he has established with his social environment. For example, the client's professional life, the associations he is a member of, hobbies, relationships with friends, relationships with his wife and children are discussed. However, the client's values for his current life, life goals,

dreams, things that add meaning to his life and the lives that the client gives priority to are examined in this process (Corey, 2017; Stein & Edwards, 2002). Because according to this approach, tendencies such as gaining superiority, liking and approval, which are the priority in the client's life, also directly affect emotional lives and lifestyle. Another point that is considered in the lifestyle analysis in the process of Adlerian therapy is family relationships. The psychological position of the client in the family, birth order, relationships with parents and siblings are examined. In this process, the *Lifestyle Assessment Scale* can be used to make an assessment. In the lifestyle analysis, important life events experienced by the client during childhood are also examined (Prinz & Arkin, 1994; Stein & Edwards, 2002). Periods of illness, past traumas, separation of parents, losses, etc. the situations are considered as important determinants of this period and are discussed in detail. Because according to the Adlerian therapy approach, past experiences provide important clues about the client's lifestyle (Adler, 1985, Stein & Edwards, 2002). Another of the points focused on in the lifestyle analysis is the dreams that the client had in childhood and recently. According to Adlerian therapy, dreams are a reflection of mood in everyday life. For this reason, dreams are an important clue in understanding the problems and internal dynamics in the client's inner world (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

After completing the lifestyle analysis in Adlerian therapy, the *third stage* of the therapy process is started. In the third stage, it is aimed to create insight in the client. For this reason, interpretations are made to emphasize the client's strengths and positive aspects. These interpretations focus on the way of life, life goals, consequences of behaviors, and now here. In this process, the encouragement technique is also frequently used so that the client can see his/her strengths and take new steps in his/her life. At this stage, the development of insight in the client is a prerequisite for the transition to the action stage, which is the fourth stage (Corey, 2017; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012; Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

In the *fourth stage* of therapy, the client is expected to take action to make new choices in his life. At this stage, the client realizes that he must take responsibility for making changes in his life goals and makes new action plans. The plans made at this stage should be realistic and achievable. The client and the therapist work together in the process of creating and implementing the action plan (Adler, 1985; Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

### **Techniques of Adlerian Therapy**

Techniques such as *interpretation* (Adler, 1985; Sweeney, 2009), *encouragement* (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012; Prinz & Arkin, 1994), *spit in the client's soup* (Prinz & Arkin, 1994), *avoiding the tar baby* (Allen, 1972; Prinz & Arkin, 1994), *paradoxical intention* (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012; Prinz & Arkin, 1994), *acting as "if"* (Prinz & Arkin, 1994), *push button* (Prinz & Arkin, 1994), *self-capture* (Prinz & Arkin, 1994), *role playing* (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012), *homeworks* (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012), *dream analysis* (Adler, 1985; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012) re used in Adleryan therapy to develop the client's social interest and sense of belonging.

**Interpretation:** In the process of Adlerian therapy, the therapist interprets from the beginning of the consultation process. When interpreting, the therapist does not aim to diagnose the client, but to explain by understanding the motivations and goals under the client's behavior (Sweeney, 2009).

**Encouragement:** In Adlerian therapy, encouraging the client to create a new way of life in line with their goals in life by emphasizing the positive aspects and making new choices in accordance with this new way of life is an important part of the therapy process (Karahana & Sardogan, 2012; Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

**Spit in the client's soup:** After the therapist determines the purpose and result of some behaviors, he disrupts the game by reducing the effectiveness of those behaviors in front of the client's eyes. In this technique, the therapist allows the client to notice irrational thoughts with logical sentences (Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

**Avoiding the tar baby:** Clients come to the consultation with some self-defeating behavior patterns that they use in daily life. Because such misperceptions work for something, clients may cling tightly to certain erroneous assumptions. In order to maintain the client's existing self-perception, he tends to use the therapist's behavior to support these perceptions. The therapist should not fall into this mistake, he should avoid touching the tar baby. Accordingly, the therapist should support the client in developing more realistic steps that will lead to success (Allen, 1972; Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

**Paradoxical intention:** In this technique, clients are asked to pay attention to and exaggerate thoughts and behaviors that weaken them. In this technique, the client is to join him instead of opposing his resistance. Adler has used this technique in the treatment of insomnia and tension. In the treatment of depressed individuals, if there is a possibility of suicide, care should be taken in using this technique (Karahana & Sardogan, 2012; Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

**Acting as "if":** the therapist can set up a role-playing environment in which the client can act or imagine as what he wants to be. When clients say, "I wish I could be like this," they are encouraged to live that role in their dreams for at least a week (Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

**Push Button:** In this technique, which aims to make the client realize the effect of life experiences on emotions, the client is asked to imagine a scene that reveals important emotions in him and to notice the emotions accompanying this scene (Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

**Self-capture:** With the self-capture technique, the client becomes aware of his behaviors or irrational thoughts that destroy him. Thus, the client notices and catches himself before developing behavior related to any event (Prinz & Arkin, 1994).

**Role playing:** During the therapy process, the client is asked to rehearse the behaviors aimed at their goals (Karahana & Sardogan, 2012).

**Homeworks:** Certain specific assignments are given while the clients are making progress related to their life goals. Assignments should be appropriate to the client's level and purpose, and should be aimed at short-term goals. If the plans do not work well, they can be discussed and renewed at the next session (Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

**Dream analysis:** According to the Adlerian therapy approach, dreams are a reflection of the mood and needs that occur in everyday life. Dreams are representations of unmet needs. It is stated that satisfaction is often achieved through dreams, especially in the second child and pampered children. Dreams are an important tool in the emergence of the client's internal dynamics. For this reason, in the process of Adlerian therapy, important dreams that the client has had in childhood and recently are examined. Actions such as flying and falling in a dream are associated with the client's sense of inferiority and superiority needs (Adler, 1985; Karahan & Sardogan, 2012).

### **Studies on the Effectiveness of Adlerian Therapy**

Adlerian approach is a humanistic, cognitive, existential, post-modern, feminist, systemic and culture-sensitive approach, although it is considered within neoanalytic theories (Corey, 2017). For this reason, in addition to adult individual therapies, Adlerian Therapy-oriented models have been put forward in family therapies and play therapies, and the effectiveness of these models has been investigated. Parent education programs have also been developed based on Adler's approach towards the individual and the family. It has been stated that Adler parental education is effective for parents to change parents' attitudes and behaviors towards their children (Campbell & Sutton, 1983, as cited in Akçabozan & Hatipoğlu-Sümer, 2016). In addition, it has been seen that these trainings increase the democratic attitude of parents towards their children and the level of encouragement, while reducing the restrictive and authoritarian attitudes of parents (Mooney, 1995).

Considering the studies conducted with adolescents, it is emphasized that social interest is closely related to addiction tendencies in adolescents (Ayas & Hatipoğlu-Sümer, 2021) and that practices aimed at improving social interest are effective both in terms of reducing adolescents' addictive behaviors and protecting basic mental health (Busari, 2016; Bluvsthein et al., 2019; Fung & Webster, 2018).

In the literature studies related to Adlerian therapy, the most emphasis is placed on the concept of social interest. In literature studies related to social interest, attention is drawn to the positive consequences of social interest for the general and mental health of individuals. (Nikelly, 2005; Rareshide & Kern, 1991). On the other hand, it is stated that lack of social interest is a risk factor related to mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse and narcissism; high social interest is associated with variables such as life satisfaction, psychological well-being, subjective well-being (Millor, Denton & Tobacyk, 1986; Mozdierz, Greenblatt & Murphy, 1986). It has been found that psychological counseling with the Adlerian-oriented group has an effect on the levels of social

competence expectation (Fırcıoğlu, 2005), burnout (Can, 2019), sense of inadequacy and psychological symptoms (Akdoğan, 2012) in students. On the other hand, it has been reported that the application of Adlerian therapy in schools is also quite practical (Fırcıoğlu, 2005).

It is stated that Adlerian play therapy works especially well in children with control difficulties such as bullying and tantrums, traumatic experiences such as parental loss or divorce, easily discouraged, easily hurt, having problems in relationships with family members and peers, low self-perception and social skills (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016; Kottman, 2001). Based on this, it can be said that Adlerian therapy is effective when working with children, adolescents and adult clients, and the approach is useful in group therapies as well as individual therapies.

### **Suitability of Adlerian Therapy for Turkish Culture**

Adler theory (Individual Psychology) evaluates individuals within the family and social system they are in, draws attention to the different cultural perspectives that family members and families have, and in this sense is considered the pioneer of multicultural psychological counseling approaches (Capuzzi & Gross, 2014). Although a study discussing the importance and applicability of Adlerian therapy in Turkey has not yet been found,; It is stated that the basic principles of the Adlerian approach are compatible with the values of Turkish culture by considering the individual within the family system and emphasizing the role played by the family in the development of the individual (Hatipoğlu Sümer & Rasmussen, 2012).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The focus of the Adlerian approach is how an individual perceives his past and how he interprets the events he first encountered. According to Adler, individuals are motivated by social relationships rather than their sexual urges. Behavior is purposeful and goal-oriented. For this reason, the focus of therapy is on behavior at the level of consciousness rather than the unconscious. Adler is the first theorist to emphasize the role of subjective opinion in psychology, focusing on the internal determinants of behavior such as values, beliefs, attitudes, goals, interests and the way an individual perceives reality (Karahana & Sardogan, 2012). Adler is the pioneer of a holistic, social, goal-oriented and humane approach. According to Adler, personality can only be fully understood if it is considered holistically and systematically (Corey, 2017). In the Adlerian approach, it is emphasized that the striving to be perfect and to cope with the feeling of inferiority by gaining superiority is an innate quality. The feeling of inferiority is not a sign of weakness or abnormality; on the contrary, it is defined as the origin of creativity. This feeling motivates individuals to achieve success and feel complete (Adler, 1985). The main goals of the Adlerian therapy process are to strengthen the client's social interest and support him to cope with the feeling of inferiority. On the other hand, changing the perceptions and goals of the clients, their lifestyles and Deceptive motivations; becoming individuals who contribute to society of

the clients is one of the important goals of the therapy process. These also make Adlerian therapy a useful therapy model.

Adler's approach is an approach that includes the foundations of community mental health studies in addition to being a psychological counseling theory. Although there are not enough researches and applications for individual psychology theory and Adlerian therapy in Turkey yet, it is thought that Adler's approach has a holistic structure, emphasis on education and parenting issues and compliance of basic concepts such as social interest with Turkish culture, the theory can make significant contributions to applications for both adults and children and adolescents. On the other hand, although it is included in neoanalytic theories, the Adlerian approach has provided the basis for many theoretical approaches that have emerged after it in terms of containing humanistic, phenomenological, cognitive-behavioral, and feminist elements.

In line with these results, some suggestions for researchers and experts working in the field have been included. Although review studies on the theory of individual psychology have been reached in the domestic literature, it has been observed that there are quite a limited number of studies on the effectiveness of Adlerian therapy. For this reason, it may be recommended to disseminate quantitative and qualitative studies on the effectiveness of Adlerian therapy in different study groups and especially its applicability in Turkish culture. On the other hand, Adlerian therapy is seen as a very useful model both from a holistic point of view of conceptualizing the client's problem and from the point of view of the techniques used, it can be used as an effective approach in family therapy and play therapy, as well as individual and group therapy by psychological counselors and other mental health specialists working in the field. Due to the fact that it is a convenient approach to practice in schools, it is believed by psychological counselors working in schools that it can be an effective approach in skill development programs for children and adolescents, individual and group psychological counseling sessions, and parenting education studies.

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