

Limits and Liabilities of Freudian Theory

“Deference for Freud’s gigantic achievement should show itself in building on the foundations he has laid.”
Karen Horney

If you were to plow through the many volumes written by Sigmund Freud, you would most certainly find parts of his theory difficult to accept or in need of elaboration. Although later students of psychoanalysis disagreed with many aspects of Freud’s thinking, three of the theory’s limits and liabilities often played key roles in the development of the neo-Freudians’ approaches.

First, many of these theorists rejected the idea that the adult personality is formed almost in its entirety by experiences in the first 5 or 6 years of life. Most neo-Freudians acknowledged that early childhood experiences have a significant effect on personality development. But many argued that later experiences, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood, are also important in shaping personality. One neo-Freudian theorist in particular, Erik Erikson, maintained that important aspects of personality continue to develop into old age.

Second, many neo-Freudians challenged Freud’s emphasis on instinctual sources of personality. In particular, Freud failed to appreciate many social and cultural forces that also shape who we are. For example, Freud attributed many of the differences he saw between the personalities of men and women to inherent biological differences between the sexes. Later theorists, most notably Karen Horney, argued that the culture we grow up in plays a large role in creating these differences. Of course, Freud did not ignore social influences altogether. But he failed to give them enough attention to satisfy many of his detractors.

Third, many psychologists disliked the generally negative tone of Freudian theory. Freud painted a pessimistic and, in some ways, degrading picture of human nature—people largely controlled by instincts and unconscious forces. Later theorists, both psychoanalytic and otherwise, presented a more positive view of humankind and human personality. Many described the constructive functions of the ego and emphasized the role of conscious rather than unconscious determinants of behavior. Other theorists spoke of growth experiences and the satisfaction people obtain from reaching their potential. These alternative views can be uplifting to those who find the Freudian perspective just a little depressing.

Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler was the first member of the psychoanalytic group to break with Freud. The year was 1911, and it was clear to both men that their differences were fundamental. Unfortunately, the professional dispute became personal as well. Freud saw Adler’s disagreements more as defections than points of discussion. When Adler left the Vienna group, several members left with him. Friendships were severed, and accusations were tossed about. Adler went on to develop his own society, establish his own journal, and even select a name for his new psychology. He called his approach *individual psychology*. Among Adler’s important contributions to our understanding of personality are the notion of striving for superiority, the role of parental influence on personality development, and the effects of birth order.

Alfred Adler 1870–1937



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Alfred Adler's career provides an excellent example of one man's lifelong striving to overcome feelings of inferiority. Adler was born in Vienna in 1870, the third of six children. Alfred spent much of his childhood in his older brother's shadow. A series of childhood illnesses, particularly rickets, left Adler physically unable to keep up with his brother and other playmates in athletic and outdoor games. He almost died of pneumonia at age 4 and twice was nearly killed when run over by carts in the streets. Because of his physical inferiority,

Adler received special treatment from his mother. However, this ended with the birth of his brother. "During my first two years my mother pampered me," he recalled. "But when my younger brother was born she transferred her attention to him, and I felt dethroned" (cited in Orgler, 1963, p. 2).

Adler also experienced feelings of inferiority in the classroom. He achieved only mediocre grades and did so poorly at mathematics one year that he had to repeat the course. His teacher advised his father to take the boy out of school and find him an apprenticeship as a shoemaker. But this episode only seemed to motivate Adler. He studied furiously and soon became the best mathematics student in the class. He went on to receive his medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1895.

Adler never studied under Freud, nor did he ever undergo psychoanalysis, as required for becoming a practicing psychoanalyst (Orgler, 1963). The two

theorists' association began in 1902 when Freud invited Adler to attend his discussion group after Adler had defended Freud's theory of dream interpretation against attacks in the local newspaper. Adler eventually was named the first president of the group in 1910.

However, growing disagreements with Freud led to Adler's resignation in 1911. Several members joined Adler in forming what was originally called the Society for Free Psychoanalytic Research—a name intended to express their objection to Freud's required adherence to his theory. Adler later changed the name of the association to Individual Psychology, established a journal, and received wide acceptance for his alternate interpretation of strict Freudian theory. As in his earlier battles to overcome feelings of inferiority, Adler devoted much of his professional life to catching and trying to surpass Sigmund Freud.

Striving for Superiority

One of the key differences between Freud and Adler was their description of human motivation. Whereas Freud depicted motivation in terms of sexual and aggressive themes, Adler identified a single motivating force he called **striving for superiority**. All other motives could be subsumed within this one construct. "I began to see clearly in every psychological phenomenon the striving for superiority," Adler wrote. "It lies at the root of all solutions of life's problems and is manifested in the way in which we meet these problems. All our functions follow its direction" (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 103).

Ironically, striving for superiority begins with feelings of inferiority. In fact, Adler maintained that each of us begins life with a profound sense of inferiority. This is to be expected from a weak and helpless child, dependent on larger and stronger adults

for survival. The moment children become aware of their relative weakness marks the beginning of a lifelong struggle to overcome their sense of inferiority.

For Adler, virtually, everything we do is designed to establish a sense of superiority over life's obstacles. Why do we work so hard to obtain good grades, to excel at athletics, or to reach a position of power? Because achieving these things moves us a step further away from our feelings of inferiority. As a rule, the more inferior we see ourselves, the stronger our striving for superiority. Franklin Roosevelt was disabled by polio. Nonetheless, Adler might have said that *because* of this disability, he aspired to become one of the most influential figures of the 20th century.

However, in some cases, excessive feelings of inferiority can have the opposite effect. Some people develop an *inferiority complex*, a belief that they are vastly inferior to everyone else. The result is feelings of helplessness rather than an upward drive to establish superiority. Children and adults who suffer from an excessive sense of inferiority avoid or run away from challenges rather than work to overcome them.

The difference between Adler and Freud can be seen in their analysis of highly successful business people. Freud often described these individuals in terms of sublimation. Commercial and financial achievements are merely misplaced unconscious impulses. Freud also might say that, for businessmen (not businesswomen), defeating rivals satisfies an unconscious desire to compete with and defeat one's father, a motive left over from the Oedipus complex. In contrast, Adler saw business success as an expression of superiority striving. Each increase in salary and each step up the corporate ladder provides another reminder that one is not inferior.

But for Adler, achievement alone was not indicative of mental health. The key is to combine superiority striving with a concern for *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, which roughly translates from German to *social interest*. Successful businesspeople achieve a sense of superiority *and* personal satisfaction through their accomplishments, but only if they reach these goals with consideration for the welfare of others. Success means providing consumers with a good product at a fair price that will make everyone's life a little happier. In contrast, poorly adjusted people express their striving for superiority through selfishness and a concern for personal glory at the expense of others. Politicians who seek public office for personal gain and a sense of power reflect a poor sense of social interest. Those who seek office to serve and to help right some of society's wrongs exhibit appropriate and constructive superiority striving.

“To be human means to feel inferior. At the beginning of every psychological life there is a deep inferiority feeling.”
Alfred Adler

Parental Influence on Personality Development

Like Freud, Adler believed the first few years of life are extremely important in the formation of the adult personality. However, Adler also placed great emphasis on the parents' role in this process. He identified two parental behaviors, in particular, that are almost certain to lead to problems for children later in life. First, parents who give their children too much attention run the risk of *pampering*. Pampering robs the child of independence and adds to feelings of inferiority. Parents who keep their sons and daughters away from carnival rides, aggressive playmates, and scary movies may leave their children unable to deal the inevitable challenges life throws their way. You may know some of these formerly pampered children who have difficulty living on their own, making their own decisions, and dealing with the daily hassles and frustrations

we all encounter. Allowing children to struggle with problems and make some of their own decisions, even if this means making mistakes, is good for them in the long run.

Parents can avoid pampering by allowing children the freedom to make many of their own choices. However, it also is possible to overdo this approach as well. The second major mistake parents sometimes make is to *neglect* their children. Children who receive too little attention from their parents grow up cold and suspicious. As adults, they are incapable of warm personal relationships. They are uncomfortable with intimacy and may be ill at ease with closeness or touching.

Birth Order

Adler was the first psychologist to emphasize the role of *birth order* in shaping personality. That is, firstborn children in a family are said to be different in personality from middle-born children, who are different from last-borns. According to Adler, firstborn children are subject to excessive attention from their parents and thus to pampering. First-time parents can never take enough photos and seldom miss an opportunity to tell friends and relatives about the new arrival. However, this pampering is short-lived. With the arrival of the second child, the firstborn is “dethroned.” Now attention must be shared with, if not relinquished to, the newest member of the family. As a result, the firstborn’s perception of inferiority is likely to be strong. Adler suggested that among firstborns we often find “problem children, neurotics, criminals, drunkards, and perverts.”

On the other hand, Adler’s assessment of middle children—Adler himself was a middle child—was more positive. These children are never afforded the luxury of being pampered, for even when they are the youngest there is always another sibling or two demanding much of the parents’ time. Adler argued that middle children develop an intense superiority striving. They are not quite as strong, not quite as fast, and not quite as smart as older brothers and sisters. It’s as if they are always just a step behind. As a result, middle-born children spend a lifetime trying to catch up. They are always looking at the person slightly ahead of them in school or in the office, always putting in a little extra effort to close the gap. Consequently, Adler said, middle-born children are the highest achievers.

Although Adler believed firstborns made up the greatest proportion of difficult children, he felt last-borns had their problems as well. Last-born children are pampered throughout their childhood by all members of the family. Older children often complain that their little brother or sister “gets away with murder,” which would not have happened “when I was that age.” However, Adler argued that this special treatment carries a price. A spoiled child is a very dependent child—a child without personal initiative. Last-born children also are vulnerable to strong inferiority feelings because everyone in their immediate environment is older and stronger.

Before applying Adler’s theory to the members of your own family, you should note that studies do not always support Adler’s predictions. Birth order often does not predict how people will score on personality measures (Jefferson, Herbst, & McCrae, 1998; Parker, 1998), and effects found in one study frequently fail to replicate in another (Michalski & Shackelford, 2002; Pollet, Dijkstra, Barelds, & Buunk, 2010). One recent investigation looked at birth order in a sample of more than 377,000 high



Jerry Burger/Santa Clara University

According to Adler, second-born children will spend a lifetime trying to catch up with their older siblings.

school students (Damian & Roberts, 2015). The researchers found the overall effect of birth order on personality to be extremely small and often at odds with predictions. In other words, although Adler succeeded in drawing attention to the role family dynamics play in the development of personality, most likely the impact of birth order is more complex and perhaps more subtle than he imagined (Cundiff, 2013; Rodgers, Cleveland, van den Oord, & Rowe, 2000; Wichman, Rodgers, & MacCallum, 2006; Zajonc, 2001; Zajonc & Sulloway, 2007).

Carl Jung

Perhaps, the most bitter of the defections from the Freudian camp was Carl Jung's break with the psychoanalytic circle. In Freud's eyes, Jung was the heir apparent to the leadership of the movement; Jung served as the first president of the International Psychoanalytic Association. However, in 1914, after long and intense disagreement with some of the basic aspects of Freud's theory, Jung resigned from the association. In the years that followed, he continued his work as a psychotherapist, traveled extensively to observe other cultures, and eventually established his own school of psychology, named *analytic psychology*.