

Adler

Individual Psychology

Chapter Overview

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Summary

ILLUSTRATIVE BIOGRAPHY**Oprah Winfrey**

Adler's theory focuses on choice and goals as more important than unconscious conflict. Oprah Winfrey's spectacular success as a television celebrity and her inspiration to help others to achieve their dreams make her a great example of the positive healthy functioning that Adler described.

Oprah Winfrey's own life and her role as a model for others focus on the theme of self-improvement by personal effort, a central idea in Adler's theory. Born in 1954 to an 18-year-old unmarried mother, Oprah's childhood environment was a mix of economic hardship, neglect, and abuse. As an adult, she is wealthy and loved by millions in her audience and by a longtime male companion. Her personal qualities were already apparent before school age—her intelligence and her strong will to succeed. The guidance that Oprah received from her father and from some of her teachers exemplifies a central lesson in Adler's theory: the importance of intervention to help a child find a socially useful lifestyle. Above all, his



Oprah Winfrey

theory would credit her own choices and personal striving for her success.

DEVELOPMENT

Adler called attention to parental behavior, which could influence a child to develop in either a selfish way or a healthy way that recognized other people's interests. He cautioned not only against pampering or giving in to the child's wishes but also against neglecting a child. The desirable path was to set standards and teach the child responsibility. Adler also recognized that a child interacts with sisters and brothers, and those interactions influence the developing personality, in part because of the different experiences of those who are the oldest, middle, or youngest in a family.

The parenting that Oprah experienced was varied. In her earliest years, she was raised by her grandparents on a poor farm.

They were not demonstrative of affection and beat her frequently to punish her (as was the practice in that place and time), but they

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encouraged her reading and church participation and so provided a solid base for her personality growth. At age 6 she went to live with her mother and a younger half sister in a one-room ghetto rooming house in Milwaukee (Mair, 1994), and she was sent back and forth a few times between that environment and her father's more disciplined home in Nashville. Her mother's neglect left her vulnerable. She was raped by an older cousin when she was 9 years old (King, 1987). She fell into undisciplined and promiscuous habits, having sex with several men, stealing money from her mother, and running away. She became pregnant, but the baby died. Faced with an increasingly out-of-control young teenager, her mother sent her again to live with her father. Vernon Winfrey and his wife gave Oprah the discipline that she needed: a curfew, advice about dealing with boys, restrictions about clothing, and homework. She thrived, becoming popular at school and responsible enough to earn the respect of her father and to set her on course for success in life. Her achievements have included spectacular fame and wealth in radio and then television, movies, and a magazine.

DESCRIPTION

In Adler's theory, each person develops a unique style of life that is formed early and remains consistent through life, directed by goals for self-improvement. He was particularly interested in the interpersonal style of the individual; for example, was the person too dependent, too domineering, or appropriately cooperative?

Oprah's life story attests to her intelligence and speaking ability and to her warmth toward other people. Already at age 3 she was able to read and write. She skipped first grade because of her ability and later was sent to a better high school than the neighborhood school, again because her achievement surpassed that of her classmates. She loved to give speeches—first to the barnyard chickens and pigs at her grandmother's farm and later to other children and to adults. She entered public-speaking contests. Her style of life seems to be one of getting attention, love, and admiration by speaking to a group of people—radio at first, and later the *Oprah Winfrey Show* on television. She talks easily with others, assertively interviewing them and expressing her opinion but with empathy.

ADJUSTMENT

Adler's theory describes compensation for previous inadequacies and disappointments as the motivating force behind healthy adjustments. In addition to love and work, the criteria that Freud proposed, he pointed out that social interaction is also an important component of good adjustment. A well-adjusted person does not pursue only selfish goals, but also contributes to society ("social interest").

Adler's criterion of social interest is fulfilled in Oprah's life. Her television shows frequently offer support and information to help others deal with adversity. Among the topics she has explored are divorce, homosexuality, transgender parents, terminal illness, sexual abuse and incest, as well as lighter themes like beauty and exercise. She is popular in part because of the generous gifts that she bestows on her television audience. Off air, she has been present for teenage girls to help them avoid unplanned pregnancy, with the life of poverty and despair that too often follows. She is helpful to others, especially in areas that draw from her own background. For example, she advocated for legislation to register child molesters as sex offenders. Over the years she has also conquered a problem with obesity, slimming down and exercising regularly. She has won acclaim and awards

for humanitarian work. Overall, these self-improvement efforts and contributions to others constitute what Adler would call a healthy style of life.

COGNITION

Although we do not always clearly think about it, each of us has an image of what would be desirable, what would make up for what is lacking (our "felt minus"). Adler called this our "fictional finalism" and suggested that it guides our efforts in life and gives a consistency to our motivation. Hints of what is felt to be lacking are often contained in a person's early memories. Over time, we may get a clearer idea of this goal. It's so important that once we understand a person's unique fictional finalism we understand that person's personality and choices.

The first descriptions of a "felt minus" that Adler proposed were based on physical features, and Oprah describes her dissatisfaction with her hair, which did not bounce like that of her white classmates; her nose, which she tried to reshape by pinching it with clothespins while she slept (Waldron, 1987); and her dark skin, especially upsetting because her lighter-skinned half sister was considered the pretty one. Later, her dissatisfaction focused on social class. She had few toys—only a doll made out of corncobs. One of her early memories is of "drawing water from the well every morning and playing with corncob dolls" (Waldron, 1987, p. 171), a clear indication that a simple and poor life was the situation from which she wished to rise. She describes seeing television images of privileged children, unlike her—white and not beaten—on friends' television sets (because their family had no television). Later, she saw upper-middle-class families in person when she visited friends from high school. These experiences helped focus her fictional finalism, her goal. She says, "Somewhere in my spirit, I always knew I was going to be exactly where I am" (Waldron, 1987, p. 18). Another important part of her goal was public performance. When she visited Hollywood and admired the sidewalk stars that commemorate celebrities, she told her father that she would be famous one day.

CULTURE

Adler's theory recognizes the society and culture to a greater extent than classical psychoanalysis. Influences from society, such as schools, offer opportunities for healthy growth. In turn, a healthy individual contributes to society. Adler criticized the way that society sometimes limits personal growth, for example through restrictive gender roles.

Although racial prejudice and unequal economic opportunity clearly existed, there were also positive influences concerning racial issues in Oprah's background. The small town where she lived in her early years (Kosciusko, Mississippi) had a history of supporting black opportunity. The town was, in fact, named for a Revolutionary War soldier who had left money on his death for the purpose of buying slaves to set them free (Waldron, 1987). She also lived at a time when antidiscrimination and equal opportunity laws made it easier for blacks and women to succeed in America, enhancing her early job opportunities in radio and television. Her movie roles, particularly the Oscar-nominated role of Sophie in *The Color Purple*, contributed to public awareness of the experience of black Americans. Another positive influence in her life was the church. As a preschooler, she spoke at church. Later, she gave impromptu sermons to kids on the playground.

earning the nickname of "The Preacher." She considered, at one point, becoming a missionary. The church as a social institution presents a vision of a better world and provides guidelines to supplement the sometimes-inadequate parental guidance of its members. Education also contributed importantly to her success, and she has encouraged reading by suggesting books on her television show.

BIOLOGY

Adler's theory does not focus on biology as a determinant of personality but rather as one of the factors that creates the basis for positive striving. Feelings of inferiority about our physical bodies provide one source of motivation for self-improvement.

As just described, Oprah felt dissatisfied with her nonwhite physical features in childhood. In adulthood, she successfully, but not easily, battled obesity. These "felt minus" aspects of her body were the basis for positive striving, epitomizing a central theme in Adler's theory.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Adler's theory and his therapeutic work challenge people to take responsibility for their lives and not to blame others for what is lacking. He stressed the value of intervention to redirect troubled youth and urged people to contribute usefully to society. All these are major themes in Oprah Winfrey's life, which stands as a positive example of personality and an inspiration for many of her fans.

PREVIEW: OVERVIEW OF ADLER'S THEORY

Adler's theory has implications for major theoretical questions, as presented in Table 4.1. His theoretical ideas are easier to test scientifically than those of Freud and Jung, and researchers have developed tests to measure style of life, early memories, and other elements of his theoretical constructs. His hypothesized relationship between birth order and personality has generated many empirical studies. The theory extends the comprehensiveness of psychoanalytic theory by including more conscious thought and future goals. It has been applied to school interventions for troubled youth and has generated an Adlerian version of psychotherapy.

Alfred Adler was one of the earliest and most influential dissenters from Freud's inner circle. Unlike Freud, who emphasized universal conflicts that all people experience, Adler focused attention on the uniqueness of each person. He named his theory "individual psychology." Freud borrowed many Adlerian ideas, although often calling them by a new name: defense mechanisms (from Adler's safeguarding tendencies), ego-ideal (from Adler's self-ideal), and superego (from Adler's counter-fiction) (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, pp. 21–22). Adler's discussions of masculine protest contributed to Freud's postulate of the Oedipus complex.

Adler argued that people must be understood from a social perspective, not a biological one. He opposed Freud's exclusive emphasis on sex as a source of energy, and

Table 4.1 Preview of Adler's Theory

Individual Differences	Individuals differ in their goals and in how they try to achieve them, their "style of life."
Adaptation and Adjustment	Health involves love, work, and social interaction and is the responsibility of each individual. Social interest, rather than selfishness, is required for health.
Cognitive Processes	Conscious experience and thought are important and generally trustworthy.
Culture	Society influences people through social roles, including gender roles. Schools are especially influential.
Biological Influences	Organ inferiority provides the direction of personality development as the individual attempts to compensate for the inferiority.
Development	Parents have an important influence on children, and better parenting techniques can be taught. Extensive guidelines for child rearing are provided, especially the caution to avoid pampering. Relationships with siblings are important; birth order affects personality. Throughout life, people create their own personalities through goal setting.