

The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler

I. In this theoretical framework, behaviour is viewed as:

A. Purposeful, goal directed, self-determined. We humans set our own goals and determine our own movements through life, although rarely are we fully conscious of our goals or why we behave the way we do. The questions are: What is the *use* of our behaviour? What *purpose* do our actions – or inactivity – serve?

B. Motivated by a desire to belong. We humans are socially embedded. We are motivated to find our place in our families, at school, at work and in society. If we feel inadequate or inferior to others, then we doubt our place in the group. Instead of moving towards participation and co-operation, we defend ourselves against those demands.

C. Holistic. Each individual is viewed as more than the sum of her/his physical, mental and emotional faculties: mind and body are interdependent, as are what is conscious and unconscious. Behaviour is best understood as part of a *unity of pattern*, which leads to an emphasis on each individual's unique *lifestyle*, a term that conveys more dynamism and movement than the term 'personality'.

II. An individual's life style:

A. Shaped by experiences in the first few years of life. Birth order, family circumstances and siblings all contribute, but our own individual ways of making sense of what we experience is even more important. In the Adlerian framework, what we remember is more important than what we forget, since our memories (however accurate) are the bases of our beliefs about ourselves, others and life in general – and *what we must do in order to find a place or even survive*.

B. Informs choices and actions. Everything we do has the goal of making us feel better or safe, but our notion of the way the world works and what we must do, our 'private logic', is often faulty and leads to our becoming stuck and unhappy. That's because private logic is based on the conclusions we came to when we were 3, 4, 5 or 6 year olds. Adler observed that common to all humans is a striving to overcome feelings of inferiority, which come about through our astounding powers of observation, which make us aware of our vulnerability and dependency. This leads to a striving for superiority - or in Adler's terms, from a felt minus to a felt plus. At the same time our individual ways of overcoming our feelings of inferiority will vary in many ways, including our innate talents or handicaps, what was going on around us, whether we were encouraged to co-operate or compete with others, whether we were able to find the 'courage to be imperfect'.

III. The Practice of Individual Psychology

Adlerian counsellors and therapists work with the *relationship* the individual has with the challenges of living – with the individual's own body, his or her bodily functions, the functions of his or her mind, as well as with external factors. The relationship the individual has with the outside world is always guided by individual self-perceptions and perceptions of external challenges or problems. *We assume a collaborative and encouraging stance, ever alert to our clients' strengths and working with them to see how they might use those strengths to achieve what they want in their lives.*

Neither heredity nor environment nor shared human limitations *determine* the individual's relationship to the outside world. Heredity endows certain abilities; environment confers relative advantages or disadvantages and impressions; being alive and human makes us vulnerable, mortal and fallible. However, the individual's *interpretations* of his or her experiences are the *substance* from which he or she *actively and uniquely creates* attitudes towards self, others, the world and life itself.

Each generation meets different problems, but each individual *sees* all of his or her problems from a perspective of his or her own creation. Through the individual's unique *biased apperceptions* life's challenges are seen as soluble or insoluble. Adler's is often referred to as a *psychology of use* not of possession. In other words, it is what we *make* of what we have and what we experience rather than what we are born with or experience that determines what we do and how we feel.

There are shared tasks from which no individual can escape, and there are a number of problems to solve, i.e. in the areas of 1) work or occupation, 2) relationships with others, 3) love, sex and intimacy, 4) relationship with self and 5) spirituality or the cosmos. The way the individual behaves towards these tasks helps us to understand his or her perceptions of, and solution to, the challenges presented by these tasks.

Life moves us towards 'becoming' or 'overcoming', towards 'perfection' towards 'superiority', towards 'success'. Life is about survival and belonging. It is not possible to train or condition a living being for defeat. But the *meaning of success* for each individual is unique and constitutes a goal that is acceptable to him or her. In reality no single individual can be typified or classified. In order to understand an individual and to help him or her understand him or herself requires a thorough investigation of his or her unique facets. However, classification helps to hone in on the individual's unique way of moving through life, and Adlerians often use one or more broad descriptive systems.

Adler's 'approaches to reality' typology – Adler himself specified four general *approaches to reality*, one of which can be observed in an individual's every interaction and relationship, from early childhood through the end of life. These are:

1) a dominant, or the *ruling (or elevating) attitude*, 2) an attitude of leaning on and expecting everything from others, or the *getting attitude*, 3) an attitude whereby success is perceived to come by avoiding the solution to a problem, which in reality involves side-stepping in an effort to avoid defeat, or the *avoiding attitude*, and 4) an adaptive attitude of grappling to find solutions to life's problems in a way that is *useful* to oneself and to others.

An individual typically retains his or her basic approach, unless he or she becomes convinced of the mistake in his or her creation of his or her attitude toward reality. Individual Psychology looks at a person's *lifestyle*, or his or her *unity* of approach and movement – an attitude developed in the first few years of life in response to his or her perceptions of reality and what he or she had to do in order to *survive*.

The *ruling/elevating, getting* and *avoiding* approaches come from being unprepared to solve life's social problems and to show little or no real interest in others. Instead, such individuals live on the *useless side of life* and demonstrate an inability or a reluctance to cooperate or to contribute. A lack of social interest inevitably leads to a clash with reality and others, often described as neurosis or maladjustment.

When working with individuals, we look for the degree of their approach to social integration, as well as their relationship to reality, which can be seen in their movement and the likelihood of achieving success.

Nira Kefr's Impasse and Priority Theory – A contemporary Israeli Adlerian, Nira Kefir observed that an individual's lifestyle – and *impasse* and *priority* – develop in the pre-conceptual stage of life, generally before the age of 10. Like Adler's *approaches to reality*, Kefr's *impasses and priorities* represent typical ways of moving in the social sphere. We first develop an *impasse* as a means of avoiding something negative or unpleasant, namely, ridicule, anonymity, rejection or stress. The dread of confronting an impasse becomes inflated, and avoidance of the impasse dominates our creation of a strategy for living. Kefr posed the question: *Are we moving towards our goals or away from danger?* Whereas Adler saw *biased apperception* as the prime mover, Kefr asserted that the way we move through life is the result of avoidance of aversive experiences.

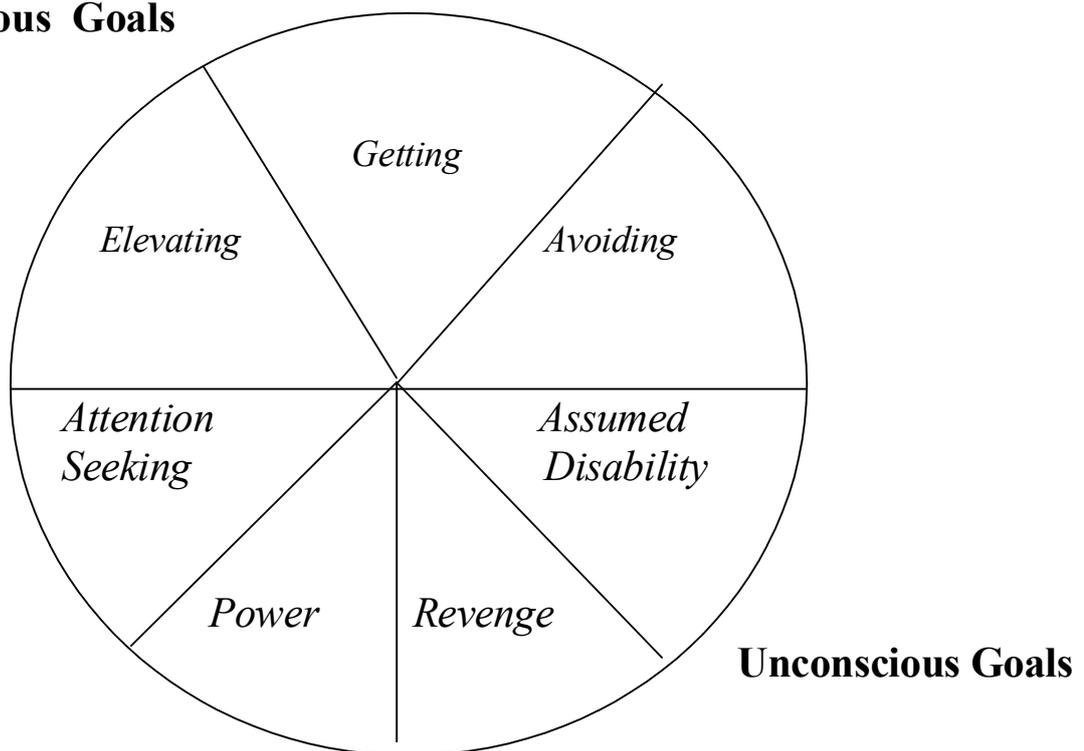
An individual's *impasse* represents one of four fears he or she always seeks to avoid: 1) those who fear *appearing ridiculous* see others as in control, 2) those who fear *being anonymous or insignificant* are concerned that life has no meaning, 3) those who fear *being rejected* see isolation as unbearable, and 4) those who fear *becoming stressed* feel confronted and overwhelmed by routine tasks.

Kefr also identified four *priorities*: 1) being in *control*, seen as a guarantee against ridicule, 2) *pleasing*, as a means of avoiding rejection or disapproval, 3) being *superior* (in all its forms) as a way of avoiding anonymity or insignificance, and 4) *avoiding* as a way to avoid stress.

While the priorities relate to the four *impasses*, Kefir argued that an individual's *priority* is not necessarily the corollary of his or her *impasse*.

Integration of Adler's and Dreikur's typologies. Vincent Byrne (2008) integrated Adler's and Dreikurs typologies by conceptualising Adler's as more conscious and Dreikur's as less conscious as shown below.

Conscious Goals



The Crucial Cs and Goals of Misbehaviour: The Basic Need to Belong. These are two related typologies, developed by Adlerians Bettner and Lew (1990) and Rudolf Dreikurs (Dreikurs and Stoltz, 1964). Adler wrote: "In addition to regarding an individual's life as a unity, we must take it together with its context of social relations... the need to be accepted and to co-operate in communal life, work and love" (Adler, 1931/1992). The fact that we are born into a group and live and work in groups throughout our lives means that each of us has developed our own ways of behaving in an effort to find a role and secure a place in any new group we join (John, 2000). Indeed, a major concern of the members of any group is the degree to which they feel accepted and included. Each member looks for ways to contribute in order to be regarded as an important and valued group member.

The Crucial Cs. Remembering the "Crucial Cs" (Bettner & Lew, 1990) can help to ensure that a group can work to meet members' basic needs: 1) to belong, to fit in, to feel secure or feel CONNECTED; 2) to feel competent and to take responsibility or to feel CAPABLE; 3) to feel significant and that we make a difference or to feel we COUNT; and 4) to feel able to handle difficult situations and overcome fear or to have COURAGE.

At any age humans can be viewed as feeling, not feeling or attempting to feel the Crucial Cs. Since they describe our fundamental psychological needs, they can be used to identify our own and others' characteristic ways of feeling and (mis)behaving in groups and prevent destructive processes taking over. Depending on our attitudes towards life and those around us – and ways of finding a place in groups based on our experiences and (sometimes mistaken) interpretation of others' behaviour and the world around us – the place we seek and find for ourselves will be a relatively constructive or destructive, satisfying or unsatisfying. For example, those who are less mistake-centred and interested in what they are doing have been found to perform better under stressful conditions and in new social situations (Dweck, 2000).

Crucial Cs, Goals of Misbehaviour and psychological needs across the lifespan.

Those familiar with Rudolf Dreikurs' work will have noticed that within their formulation, Lew and Bettner have included the *goals of misbehaviour* (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964) or patterns of behaviour likely to be displayed when the Crucial C's or fundamental psychological needs are unmet *or are felt to be unmet*. That is, when we feel we cannot *connect*, we are likely to engage in *attention seeking*; when we do not feel *capable*, we are likely to make bids for *power*; when we do not feel we *count*, we may seek *revenge* and hurt others the way we've been hurt; when we lose *courage*, we *assume disability* and seek to *avoid* life's demands.

Developmental psychologists (Connell, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan, 1995) offered parallel models based on theories and research in social cognition, motivation and self-regulation, with which the Lew-Bettner/Dreikurs formulation can be compared. They proposed our fundamental psychological needs, which motivate us to take action across the life span are: 1) *relatedness* (connected), 2) *competence* (capable), and 3)

autonomy (count), which when met lead to positive *engagement* and when not lead to disengagement and/or anti-social behaviour. It might be argued that while describing the need to be recognised and taken into account as an individual with needs and desires, *autonomy* and *count* are not the same, which is highlighted below in the next section.

Perceived dilemmas or conflicts in feeling the Crucial Cs. Lew and Bettner (1993) suggested that the Crucial Cs can be conceptualised in developmental sequence. The first need, then, is to *connect* and this is equated with *survival* (as well as belonging). The second is to feel *capable* (or competent), which is regarded as a requirement for *self-respect* or a basic *sense of self*. Finally, to *count* (or to feel significant and unique) is associated with the later developmental need to achieve a sense of *self as distinctive*, *of self-esteem* or *self-worth*. A common mistake among young children is to conclude that one must choose between *connect* (belonging or survival) and *capable* or *count* (sense of self, self-worth, significance). This provides a useful way of understanding the often-observed gender split between *connection* and *autonomy*: i.e., women seeking relationship and men seeking independence (e.g. Miller, 1986). Harter and her colleagues have studied self-development across the life-span and have uncovered similar dilemmas and splits across gender and age groups (e.g. Harter, 1999).

The Courage to Be Imperfect

Within this view of psychology, good mental health is associated with a positive sense of self, which leads to a positive interest in others, co-operation (rather than competition) and a desire to contribute to the good of the family and society as a whole. When we try to be better than other people, we demonstrate our concern with self-elevation and with our own prestige rather than our concern for others. As we all know, when we feel good about ourselves we are more likely to help others; and when we help others we tend to feel good about ourselves. It is when we feel unsure of ourselves that we seek superiority and become 'self-absorbed and pre-occupied with "how we are doing"'. Discouragement, fierce competition, unrealistically high standards and over-ambition characterise many ineffective and unhappy human beings. High ambition is directly related to the depth of our feelings of inferiority.

While people should be encouraged in their efforts to "get it right" and even to excel, they should not be expected to achieve perfection. Mistakes should be regarded as aids to learning, not as failures. Research has confirmed that anticipating the danger of a mistake makes us more vulnerable to error; success is most likely when we concentrate on "what we are doing" (Dweck, 1999). Many homes, schools, workplaces and relationships are mistake-centred and fault-finding. Figure 1 depicts self-preoccupation and useless striving for perfectionism and superiority. Yet mistakes are unavoidable and generally less important than what we do after we've made one. This is what we mean when we talk about resilience, moving towards and caring about others are more likely when we feel good about ourselves – that is, when we feel the Crucial Cs.

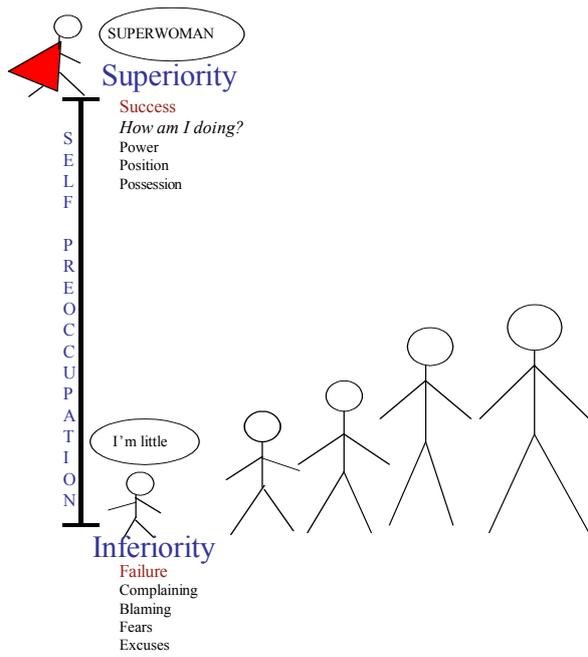


Figure 1. Striving to overcome feeling inferior

We must carry on, maintaining our courage and facing life's challenges with hope and optimism. One way to understand mental health problems is to see them as self-absorbed efforts to overcome feelings of inferiority. Figure 2 depicts the notion of moving towards others and working together, compared with self-preoccupied striving for perfection and superiority. This requires the courage to be imperfect.

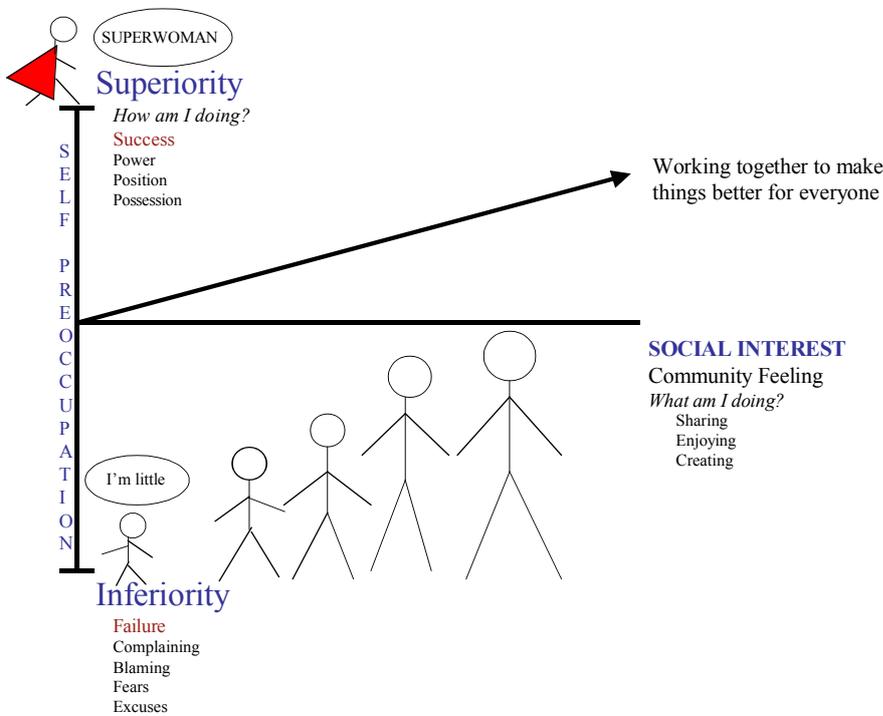


Figure 2. The Courage to be Imperfect

THE CRUCIAL Cs

If I **Have** the "Crucial Cs"

If I **Don't Have** the "Crucial Cs"

CONNECT

I feel *secure*
I can reach out
Make friends
I Cooperate

I believe
I belong

I feel *insecure, isolated*
I'm more susceptible to
peer pressure
I seek Attention

I need *Communication Skills*

CAPABLE

I feel *competent*
I have self-control
& self-discipline
I am Self Reliant

I believe
I can do it

I feel *inadequate*
I try to control others or
prove 'you can't make me'
I become dependent
I seek Power

I need *Self-Discipline*

COUNT

I feel *valuable*
I can make a difference
I Contribute

I believe
I matter

I feel *insignificant*
I may try to hurt back
I seek Revenge

I need to *Assume Responsibility*

**IN ORDER TO LOOK FOR THE CRUCIAL Cs
THROUGH USEFUL MEANS, WE NEED:**

COURAGE

I feel *hopeful*
I am willing to try
I am Resilient

I believe
I can handle what comes

I feel *inferior*
I may give up
I use Avoidance

I need *Good Judgment*

I AM ENCOURAGED

I AM DISCOURAGED

Misbehaviour is a symptom of someone who is discouraged about his or her ability to connect, feel capable and/or count through constructive means.

From: B.L. Bettner & A. Lew: *Raising Kids Who Can*. Newton, MA: Connexions Press, 1990.

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