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Category: Cognitive Practice

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# Adlerian Psychology

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“You may know this, but well water stays at pretty much the same temperature all year round, at about 18 degrees. That is an objective number – it stays the same to everyone who measures it. But when you drink the water in the summer it seems cool and when you drink the same water in the winter it seems warm. Even though it’s the same water, at the same water 18 degrees according to the thermometer, the way it seems depends on whether it’s summer or winter.”

This is a quote from the book „The Courage to be Disliked“ by Ichiro Kishimi and Fumitake Koga. It inspired me to write about the so-called Adlerian Psychology, which is, in contrast to Freud’s Psychoanalysis, a psychology where the focus is on finality and not on causality. I think most of us heard statements like these in their everyday lives: “I am not good in math, that’s reason for my bad grades.”, I have had bad experiences with relationships, that’s why I can no longer show my feelings to others and I am not capable of a relationship.” and so on. Let us dig a bit deeper into it.

According to Alfred Adler, no experience is a reason for our success or failure. We turn our past experiences into something that corresponds to our purpose or our goals. The way a person behaves in life is because of their set goals. This principle is called Teleology (striving for goals).

Each of us has a certain own Self-Ideal. This Self-Ideal is purely futuristic and shapes the course of our life. According to Adler, the Self-Ideal is subjectively superior compared to our self in the present. This aim for superiority is the fundamental drive behind human behaviour. Goals in life can be seen as building blocks to reach that defined Self-Ideal. Our lifestyle, which are subjective unarticulated guidelines individuals develop, paves the path to that Self-Ideal. Every human lifestyle is different. Nevertheless, every lifestyle also has certain weaknesses, that life, which is so chaotic and unpredictable, brings to light. Those weak points can trigger feelings of inferiority in us. However, these feelings of inferiority only arise when they conflict with our self-ideal.

Those inferiorities can be divided in objective ones which are clearly measurable and subjective ones which, as the name already implies, are clearly related to the feelings and perception of the individual (see also the quote above).

For example, money, height, and strength could be objective inferiorities, because they are clearly measurable in a defined environment. These inferiorities only emerge if they are important to the individual and therefore can be related to the Self-Ideal. If my Self-Ideal is a futuristic person who has one million dollars in his bank account but right now I have lost my job and therefore my bank

account is rather shrinking than thriving, I can definitely build up a feeling of inferiority. If my Self-ideal is to be happy in life and right now I have lost my unsatisfactory job, the state of being unemployed is not in conflict with my Self-Ideal and then there is no emergence of an inferiority.

To deal with a possible inferiority, according to Adler, there are different coping behaviours. Either we can apply the direct problem-solving approach or the compensation approach. The direct problem-solving approach is not always possible, because it is mostly influenced by external factors. If I have lost my job, I could try to get a new one. Sometimes it works, sometimes not. That is the direct problem-solving approach, which is the favored one.

An example for the compensation approach could be the following: If I lost my sight and therefore, I am not able to read anymore, I could learn to read braille. In Adler's eyes, both of these approaches are seen as positive ones, because they represent courage to life.

Anyway, an easier, but more negative option for many people would be the safeguarding behaviour. When we fall back onto safeguarding behaviours, we are trying to shake the feeling of inferiority off. Safeguarding Behaviour is characterized by the fact that it protects a pretense of superiority to the outside world. An example would be the following: A student studies a lot for an upcoming important exam in university. He wants a good grade, but almost fell through the exam. Later on, he said to his peers that he would not have wanted a good grade anyway.

Thus, he retains the outward appearance of being superior, although he has inferior feelings of inferiority inside due to the bad grade. Moreover, an inferiority can magnify to an inferiority complex, if someone is exposed permanently to such feelings of inferiority. On page 61, the book demonstrates an example most people know from everyday life:

“There is nothing particularly wrong with the feeling of inferiority itself. You understand this point now, right? As Adler says, the feeling of inferiority can be a trigger for striving and growth. For instance, if one had a feeling of inferiority with regard to one's education, and resolved to oneself, I'm not well educated, so I'll just have to try harder than anyone else, that would be a desirable direction. The inferiority complex, on the other hand, refers to a condition of having begun to use one's feelings of inferiority as a kind of excuse. So, one thinks to oneself, I'm not well educated, so I can't succeed, or I'm not good looking, so I can't get married. When someone is insisting on the logic of “A is the situation, so B cannot be done” in such a way in everyday life, that is not something that fits in the feeling of inferiority category. It is an inferiority complex.”

To avoid such inferiority complexes, we need to be realistic about our goals and hence our Self-Ideal. We could stop making excuses based on our past, our stories, our failures and our experiences. Instead we should put our ego aside, making down-to-earth plans and be positive about them. If something doesn't work, try your best to change it and don't hide behind your safeguarding behaviours.