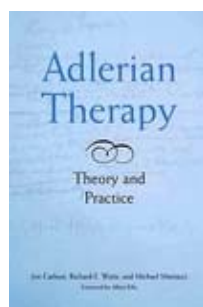


A Long-Awaited Book on Adlerian Psychotherapy for the Modern Reader

A review of



Adlerian Therapy: Theory and Practice

by Jon Carlson, Richard E. Watts, and Michael Maniacci

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006.
313 pp. ISBN 1-59147-285-7.
\$59.95

Reviewed by
[Eva Dreikurs Ferguson](#)

Alfred Adler's name is familiar to most introductory psychology students. However, their knowledge typically comes from small textbook paragraphs in connection with Freud, Adler's name being a kind of post script to psychoanalysis. Occasionally students associate "birth order" with Adler's name. When undergraduate majors and graduate students learn more about Adler, often that entails misinformation. At one time, the European and American public had knowledge of this famous psychiatrist, who was a staunch advocate for the welfare of children and for women's rights. Today, the public as well as modern psychologists and psychiatrists have little awareness of Adler's massive contribution, nor do they know that Adler's theory and methods are widely applied and practiced today.

Adler's Mature Work From the 1920s and 1930s Is Alive and Well Today

Many professional psychologists think

Adlerian psychology was practiced only in the early part of the 20th century. They do not know of the worldwide Adlerian activities in the 21st century. Readers of *Adlerian Therapy: Theory and Practice* will now have the opportunity to learn that Adler's approach is at the forefront of contemporary psychology, in clinical practice, as well as in the fields of developmental, educational, and social psychology. The cognitive-social-dynamic theory of Adler, widely promulgated by his younger colleague, Rudolf Dreikurs, was many years ahead of its time (Ferguson, 2001) and, as a result, is now congruent with many facets of contemporary psychology.

By 1937, when Adler died, his methods and ideas were known and practiced in many countries. Today they are actively applied in the fields of education (Dreikurs, Cassel, & Ferguson, 2004) and parenting (Dreikurs & Soltz, 2005), as well as in psychotherapy and counseling (Grunwald & McAbee, 1998). It was Adler, in the 1920s, who first placed pivotal importance on "the need to belong" (Ferguson, 1989). This is a prominent concept in modern social psychology, usually discussed without reference to its origin in Adler's work. Social and clinical psychologists now have the opportunity to have a better understanding of the richness of Adlerian theory and practice. The American Psychological Association is to be commended for publication of *Adlerian Therapy*, a book that promises to bring to light many of the potent ideas and methods that are part of contemporary Adlerian psychology.

Jon Carlson, Richard E. Watts, and Michael Maniacci clearly describe the way contemporary Adlerian psychotherapy is practiced. Two of the authors received doctoral training in the Adlerian institute founded by Rudolf Dreikurs, and their mentors, Bernard Shulman and Harold Mosak, were long-time colleagues of Dreikurs. The book *Adlerian Therapy* describes many of the key concepts

and methods developed by Adler. Emphasis is properly placed on Adler's psychoeducational approach, the importance of "social interest" (also known as "community feeling") and the need to belong and to contribute to the human community, the key motivational dynamics of goals, the importance of beliefs and cognitions in both healthy and pathological functioning, and lifestyle as the core of personality.

▬ Readers will appreciate the clear exposition of how categories of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev.; *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) can be translated in functional and dynamic ways. Whereas the *DSM-IV-TR* for clinical diagnoses has a medical and largely nondynamic foundation, and Adler's approach to diagnosis and psychotherapy is in terms of dynamic and educational processes, contemporary clinicians will find it useful that the book gives examples of how a functional perspective is possible when using the *DSM-IV-TR* in diagnoses. Readers will also benefit from the examples that show how lifestyle can be analyzed, how family constellation and family dynamics play a key role in the adult's personality and symptoms, how brief therapy fits the Adlerian model, and how therapy can help individuals alter pathological beliefs and goals. The importance of social interest and community feeling for effective functioning is clearly described, and therapists will be able to follow why social psychological concepts are so prominent in Adlerian therapy.

▬ The authors highlight the importance of cognitive processes throughout the book while properly integrating the dynamics of goals with cognitions. Adlerian psychotherapy is, indeed, a cognitive therapy, but it differs from other cognitive approaches in its emphasis on motivation and on the pivotal role of goals. One cannot understand behavior, motivation,

and emotion without appreciating the overarching importance of goals (Ferguson, 2000), and the authors ably bring this perspective forward in their writing. They show the subjective aspect of Adler's approach, and how individuals make choices and decisions in their adaptation to life's demands. They properly integrate the concept of Adler's "tasks of life," with healthily functioning individuals having close friends, maintaining deep love relationships, and doing effective work that contributes to society. They describe the therapeutic relationship as one of cooperation, and they show the necessity for the therapist to provide encouragement. It is important to note that they lead the reader to understand the optimism inherent in Adler's theory and practice. If choices and decisions in early life can create pathology in adulthood, then with new insights, the adult can make new choices and decisions and set new goals. This "soft determinism" characteristic of Adler's theory is expressed well in the book, as is the fact that Adler's psychotherapy is eminently congruent with the emphasis today on positive psychology.

What Can Adlerian Theory and Practice Bring to Contemporary Psychologists?

— The influence of mechanistic thinking on psychology is well known to students of the history of psychology. Many prominent psychologists have viewed the task of science to be a careful understanding and description of mechanisms. Behaviorism emphasized mechanisms, and associationism in its various forms throughout the history of psychology has tended to treat mind and behavior in mechanistic terms. Thus, much of psychology has placed major importance on either structure or biology. In contrast, Adlerian theory and practice places importance on function and psychosocial processes. The Gestalt principles of holism and the importance of context on mind and behavior are not a

major theme in the history of psychology, in spite of attempts like those of Tolman to integrate cognition with the dynamics of motivation and the pivotal role of context. It is easier to think of dynamics in biological terms, as Freud did, or to think of environmental influences in mechanistic terms or in molecular ways that are characteristic of associationistic theories, than to explain mind and behavior in relativistic, holistic, and socially adaptive ways as does Adlerian theory and practice.

✍ The authors of *Adlerian Therapy* have in many respects preserved the holistic, contextual, psychosocial, and dynamic aspects of Adlerian theory and practice. They have given case material that shows the importance of context, such as the life situation that triggers pathological functioning in a previously "healthy functioning" individual. That is, for a given lifestyle, when circumstances are benign and support the personality with its goals and beliefs, an individual can function well, but when a crisis situation occurs and new beliefs and goals are called for so that the person can meet the demands of life, the person may experience extreme stress and adopt pathological methods of coping. This contextual aspect of Adlerian theory and practice is brought forth well in the book. The authors also show the holistic aspect of Adlerian concepts and methods by excellent descriptions of both top-down and bottom-up processes. That is, organ deficiencies or biological weaknesses (bottom-up processes) are shown to play a role while the impact of social beliefs and goals for finding one's place in the human community (top-down processes) are ably described in their power to change a person's bodily functioning. The authors bring out well the Adlerian concept that "biology is not destiny," and they ably show that our social-personal beliefs can change our physiology and chemistry as much as the latter can influence the former. In this way, the book contributes

to a broadening perspective for all psychologists, and the psychosocial holism of Adler's theory and practice is easy to follow in the book.

☞ Another value of the book is its many references to important contemporary Adlerian writings. Where the authors consider that important details cannot be included for the sake of brevity, such as the questionnaires that have been published for interviewing clients and for diagnosing important aspects of the lifestyle, they provide ample references that a professional reader will want to access. The book also provides illustrations of therapeutic methods that enable the reader to see the application of theory in actual practice.

☞ Where might deficiencies in the book be found? As any book author can testify, "perfection" is an ideal rather than a reality. One cannot write "the perfect book" for many reasons, and although I expect *Adlerian Therapy* to be read and appreciated widely, uniquely perceived weaknesses of this book will be found by each reader. My overall reaction is that this is a very valuable, well-written, and important book. I believe the authors are clear and do justice to Adler's ideas and to the way Adlerians practice therapy, and the references the authors cite are apt and very useful. I do have some concerns, however. One concern is that the authors leave out crucial and relevant Dreikurs references. This poses a problem, because in many cases they cite references to concepts either formulated by Dreikurs (e.g., the four mistaken goals) or largely elaborated by Dreikurs (e.g., encouragement, sibling relationships, horizontal strivings), yet they fail to cite the original sources. Instead, they cite the references that come from persons who learned Adlerian psychology and its practice directly from Dreikurs (e.g., Dinkmeyer) or the references are from persons who learned Adlerian psychology from those whom Dreikurs

taught. I also found it a bit strange that the authors do not cite any of my own work. However, "social interest" trumps "ego concerns" for an Adlerian, so I do not feel either "inferior" or "discouraged" in the way Adlerians describe maladaptive emotions.

✍ I am also concerned about the overreliance on mechanistic terminology in the book, so that people's motivation and coping styles are given a categorical perspective rather than described in more idiosyncratically subjective terms. In addition, the role of family dynamics needs to be brought out more clearly in descriptions of the formation of "lifestyle," the role of misconceptions that impair healthy adaptive functioning needs to be stressed more in various sections of the book, and the fact that emotion is in the service of goals should be more strongly emphasized. I am also uneasy that the important Adlerian concept of "the psychology of use" is not fully discussed in the book. There are some mistakes of facts (e.g., to my knowledge, Adler never knew what happened to his oldest child, Valentina, who died in the U.S.S.R. gulags), and there are unfortunate uses of nomenclature that this reviewer found irksome (e.g., the term *guilt feelings* needs to be reserved for those occasions in which the person uses "guilt feeling" as an excuse). Moreover, the authors use the term *inferiority complex* in a somewhat different way than Adler and Dreikurs. However, in spite of these concerns, the book is beyond a doubt enormously welcome, expertly written, and needed by a whole generation of psychologists who have insufficient knowledge of Adler's valuable theory and practice. I believe it offers powerful insights, and I recommend it as a truly influential work. I am grateful that these expert authors wrote this highly readable book, which will be useful and important not only for the clinician but also for social, developmental, and cognitive-behavioral psychologists.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Dreikurs, R., Cassel, P., & Ferguson, E. D. (2004). *Discipline without tears*. Toronto: Wiley.
- Dreikurs, R., & Soltz, V. (2005). *Children: The challenge*. New York: Putnam-Penguin.
- Ferguson, E. D. (1989). Adler's motivational theory: An historical perspective on belonging and the fundamental human striving. *Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research, and Practice*, 45, 354-361. [PsycINFO](#)
- Ferguson, E. D. (2000). *Motivation: A biosocial and cognitive integration of motivation and emotion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ferguson, E. D. (2001). Adler and Dreikurs: Cognitive-social-dynamic innovators. *The Journal of Individual Psychology*, 57, 324-341. [PsycINFO](#)
- Grunwald, B. B., & McAbee, H. V. (1998). *Guiding the family: Practical counseling techniques* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis.