

THE NEUROTIC CARRIES A FEELING OF INFERIORITY WITH HIM CONSTANTLY

ALFRED ADLER (1870–1937)

IN CONTEXT

APPROACH

Individual psychology

BEFORE

1896 William James says that self-esteem is about a ratio of "goals satisfied" to "goals unmet" and can be raised by lowering expectations as well as through achievements.

1902 Charles Horton Cooley describes the "looking glass self," the way we view ourselves is based on how we imagine other people view us.

AFTER

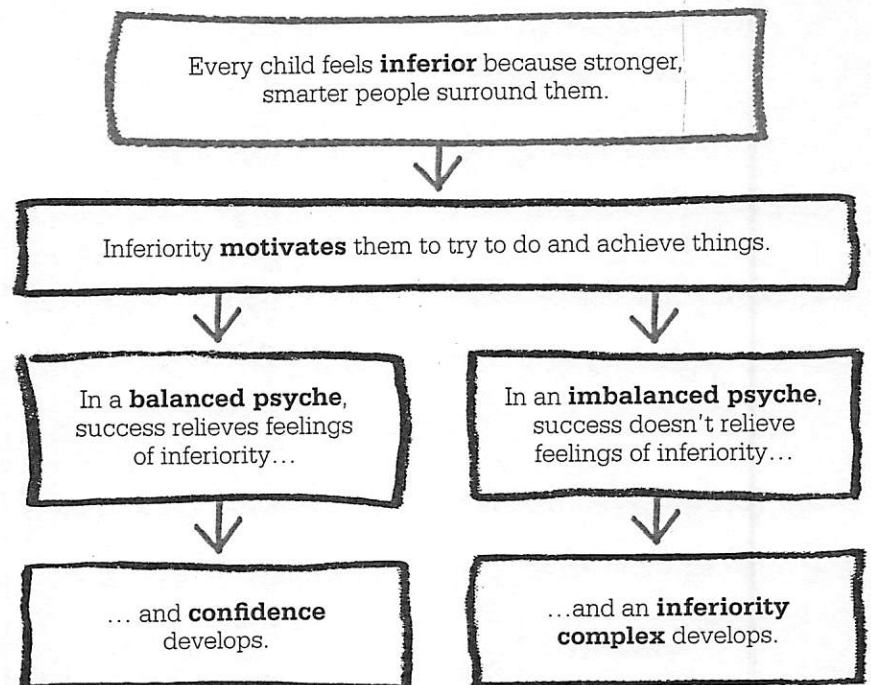
1943 Abraham Maslow says that to feel both necessary and good about ourselves we need achievements as well as respect from others.

1960s British psychologist Michael Argyle states that comparison shapes self-esteem; we feel better when we feel more successful than others, and worse when we feel less successful than others.

Freudian thinking dominated psychotherapy in the late 19th century, but Freud's approach was limited to addressing unconscious drives and the legacy of an individual's past. Alfred Adler was the first psychoanalyst to expand psychological theory beyond the Freudian viewpoint, suggesting that a person's

psychology was also influenced by present and conscious forces, and that the influence of the social realm and environment was equally vital. Adler founded his own approach, individual psychology, based on these ideas.

Adler's particular interest in inferiority and the positive and negative effects of self-esteem



See also: Karen Horney 110 ■ Eric Fromm 124-29 ■ Abraham Maslow 138-39 ■ Rollo May 141 ■ Albert Ellis 142-45



A paralympic athlete may be driven by a powerful desire to overcome her disabilities and reach greater levels of physical achievement. Adler described this trait as "compensation."

began early in his career, when he worked with patients who had physical disabilities. Looking at the effects that disability had on achievement and sense of self, he found huge differences between his patients. Some people with disabilities were able to reach high levels of athletic success, and Adler noted that in these personalities, the disability served as a strong motivational force. At the other extreme, he witnessed patients who felt defeated by their disability and who made little effort to improve their situation. Adler realized that the differences came down to how these individuals viewed themselves: in other words, their self-esteem.

The inferiority complex

According to Adler, feeling inferior is a universal human experience that is rooted in childhood. Children naturally feel inferior

because they are constantly surrounded by stronger, more powerful people with greater abilities. A child generally seeks to emulate and achieve the abilities of its elders, motivated by the surrounding forces that propel him toward his own development and accomplishments.

Children and adults with a healthy and balanced personality gain confidence each time they realize that they are capable of meeting external goals. Feelings of inferiority dissipate until the next challenge presents itself and is overcome; this process of psychic growth is continual. However, an individual with a physical inferiority may develop more generalized feelings of inferiority—leading to an unbalanced personality and what Adler termed an "inferiority complex," where the feelings of inferiority are never relieved.

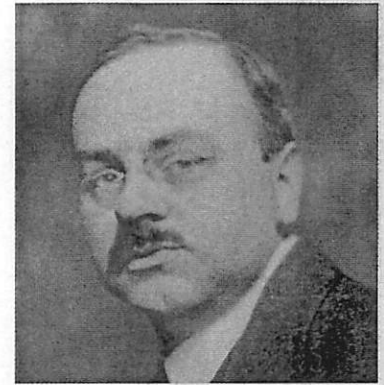
Adler also recognized the equally unbalanced "superiority complex," manifested in a constant need to strive toward goals. When attained, these goals do not instill confidence in the individual, but merely prompt him to continually seek further external recognition and achievements. ■

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To be human is to feel inferior.

Alfred Adler

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Alfred Adler

After coming close to death from pneumonia at the age of five, Alfred Adler expressed a wish to become a physician. Growing up in Vienna, he went on to study medicine, branching into ophthalmology before finally settling with psychology. In 1897, he married Raissa Epstein, a Russian intellectual and social activist, and they had four children.

Adler was one of the original members of the Freudian-based Vienna Psychoanalytical Society and the first to depart from it, asserting that individuals are affected by social factors as well as the unconscious drives that Freud identified. After this split in 1911, Adler flourished professionally, establishing his own school of psychotherapy and developing many of psychology's prominent concepts. He left Austria in 1932 for the US. He died of a heart attack while lecturing at Aberdeen University, Scotland.

Key works

1912 *The Neurotic Character*
1927 *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*
1927 *Understanding Human Nature*