

# Rediscovering Adler

Henry T. Stein

## Abstract

The article addresses the importance of understanding Adler in his original expression rather than relying on contemporary summaries of his work. The author establishes *The Collected Clinical Works of Alfred Adler* as the foundation of Classical Adlerian Depth Psychotherapy training, which is currently the only training based on Adler's original work, authentically representing him.

**Keywords:** Individual Psychology, Alfred Adler, Classical Adlerian Depth Psychotherapy, collected clinical works

In this special issue of *Journal of Individual Psychology* I would like to offer six candid responses to the fundamental inquiry about studying Adler's original works.

Why study *The Collected Clinical Works of Alfred Adler* (the CCWAA)? Because misrepresentations of Adler permeate academic textbooks, training programs, and journal articles. Some instructors pull a few of his ideas out of their complex coherence to create easy-to-learn, popularized systems. Some organizations use these systems to "market" Adler to prospective students, who are then taught something with Adler's name that may bear little resemblance to his original teachings and style of treatment. Some authors of journal articles try to "improve" Adler to show how he can be connected to the latest trend, or "incorporated" into an eclectic approach and "integrated" into current trends of psychotherapy. None of this does justice to Adler.

Why study the CCWAA? Because what Adler says there cannot be found anywhere else. Simplifications and distortions of Adlerian theory of personality, philosophy of living, and strategies for treatment are widespread. Indeed, these misrepresentations not only constitute the bulk of what is widely known as "Adlerian" today but also have alienated much of the wider depth therapy community, who often dismiss Adler's approach as superficial and aggressive. On the basis of what they have probably been taught, have read, or have seen demonstrated at workshops and conferences, they mistakenly pass judgment on Adler in a way that does not do him justice.

Why study the CCWAA? Because today we all labor under a common handicap: none of us has studied personally with Alfred Adler. At best, a few of us have studied with mentors who were trained by Adler. Even fewer have

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studied with mentors who remained faithful to Adler's original teachings and style of treatment. Consequently, if we wish to do justice to Adler's approach, especially if we practice or teach psychotherapy, we have to compensate in two ways. First, we have the obligation to study and discuss his original writings until they become a rock-solid foundation for our treatment style. Also, to make Adler's theory, philosophy, and treatment principles come alive, we need to find a mentor who reflects the congruence of knowledge and character that Adler required of Individual Psychologists.

My mentor, Sophia J. de Vries (1901–1999), a masterful therapist who studied with Alfred Adler, Lydia Sicher, and Alexander Mueller, represented Adler faithfully in her work and her personal life. She inspired a small group of us to keep Adler's work alive in its original form. She cherished what Adler had given her, and she felt obligated to pass it on as accurately as possible. In her mid-90s, she still regularly studied Adler's writings in English and German. She encouraged me to teach others what I had learned from her and to publish new English translations of Adler's important clinical writings. The publishing project, which became the CCWAA, took many years, and it is now available in paperback and e-book formats. Sophia's mentor, Alexander Mueller, predicted in the 1950s that for Individual Psychology to have its full impact, "Adler has not yet been fully understood. He will have to be rediscovered, from the roots up, by a future generation." We can be that generation.

Why study the CCWAA? Although Adler's popular books, like *Understanding Human Nature* (Adler, 1927/1998), *Understanding Life* (Adler, 1929/1998), *What Life Could Mean to You* (Adler, 1931/2009), and *Social Interest* (Adler, 1938/2009), provide fine introductions to his ideas for students and the general public, they are insufficient resources for the psychotherapist. Only in the CCWAA can we find the accurate, complete, and coherent Adler. The 12-volume series contains the full range of his therapeutic constructs, all repeatedly applied to a multitude of difficult cases. We cannot achieve an effective life-style analysis by merely listing a client's mistaken ideas or identifying a typology. The heart of a successful treatment plan begins with a diagnosis based on using all of Adler's constructs that are appropriate to that case, customizing our diagnosis and treatment for the unique needs of each individual.

In practice, this means combing through all our interview notes and impressions to find clues that reveal the client's hidden dynamics, framing them with the relevant constructs such as the following: depth and type of inferiority feelings, strength and direction of the striving for superiority, degree and zone of activity (cognitive, affective, behavioral), level and type of intelligence, spectrum and purpose of feelings and emotions, range and depth of the feeling of community, private logic, modes of distance, depreciation tendency, antithetical scheme of apperception, and counter-fiction.

Our initial guesses about clients' movement in relation to their life tasks, combined with the relevant constructs, provide the raw material for the fermentation of analysis, intuition, and imagination that helps us uncover the height, direction, and range of the compensatory, hidden, *fictional final goal*. This last, crucial step involves an intuitive, creative leap that is not easy to master. To uncover the fictional goal, we have to learn how to translate our case impressions into psychological movement, a skill that is missing from most Adlerian training today—yet Adler emphasizes the importance of “looking for the movement” repeatedly in his writings.

The CCWAA provides the foundation for our training and certification in Classical Adlerian Depth Psychotherapy. Our students study and discuss all of Adler's theoretical constructs and eventually use these constructs in extensive case supervision, focusing on life-style diagnosis and treatment planning. They participate in a rigorous personal study analysis to dissolve their restrictive life style and redirect striving away from a compensatory fictional goal and move toward universal values so that they can live more creatively and serve their clients more fully. We also include the inspirational writings of Abraham Maslow (cf. e.g., Maslow, 1971/1993) because they provide a path compatible with Adler's vision of optimal human development. Only someone who experiences firsthand the emotional, intellectual, affective gestalt of Adlerian depth psychotherapy can accomplish it successfully with clients. This mentor-oriented, one-to-one relationship cannot be achieved quickly or in a group setting. Once a year, our community of learners comes together from all over the world in a three-day experiential workshop. Students help one another work on personal or professional issues, practicing what they know about Adlerian theory and treatment, building bonds of mutual support that exist nowhere else.

Why study the CCWAA? Because Adler was a genius. When we want to listen to Mozart, we play Mozart, not some imitation. Those who want to simplify and reduce Adler resemble Mozart's patron in the film *Amadeus* who, bewildered by the richness and complexity of Mozart's music, suggests that the composer abbreviate his composition because “there are too many notes.” In Classical Adlerian Depth Psychotherapy, we are dedicated to training depth psychotherapists who can play all the notes.

Why study the CCWAA? Because unless more people learn not only what Adler really said but also how to use it, we risk losing his legacy. That is the crisis. If more clinicians do not learn how to practice Adler's original art of depth psychotherapy, what will happen to it? Who will teach it in years to come? Will it fade into obscurity, with merely the misrepresentations, “integrations,” and “hybrids” surviving? Adler's voice deserves to be heard today, because only his unique synthesis of philosophy, pedagogy, and psychology points the way for therapists to guide clients toward democratic living by building democratic character. He deserves no less.

### Author's Note

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