

Roots & Branches

The “Roots and Branches of Positive Psychology” article featured here is a new addition to the *Naming and Nurturing* newsletter. This column aims to highlight both the foundational “roots” of modern positive psychology as well as the cutting-edge “branches” of this vibrant area of theory, research, practice, and training. In this edition, Dr. Eva Dreikurs Ferguson shares her perspective regarding the relationship between Adlerian Psychology and contemporary positive psychology. We welcome your input about Dr. Dreikurs Ferguson’s article on our section’s listserv, and encourage you to let us know if you would like to contribute an article for the Roots and Branches column of future editions of the *Naming and Nurturing Newsletter*.



Adlerian Psychology is Positive Psychology – and Much More

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This paper seeks to address a historical deficiency, in that positive psychologists may not know how closely their field is related to and actually mirrors the writings of Alfred Adler and

other Adlerians. Leak and Leak (2006, p. 209) aptly indicated: “Adlerian theory and therapy, like positive psychology, see human virtues (e.g., tendencies toward love and cooperation) as sources of strength that serve as buffers against the deleterious effects of stress on well-being.”

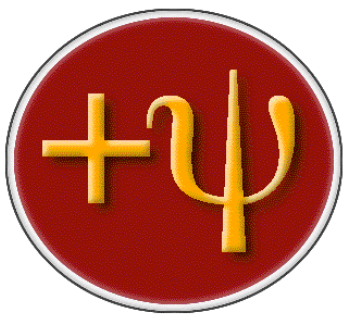
Adlerian Psychology, also known as ‘Individual Psychology,’ had its origins in the early part of the 20th century. Most importantly, for a century it has been practiced in many countries and described in countless books and articles. The present paper seeks to help positive psychologists find relevant writings and organizations, so they can learn more about the origins and development of positive psychology a hundred years ago. As a young physician, Alfred Adler early in the 20th century sought ideas from Freud in Vienna, Austria. They met regularly to discuss some of their patients, and for some years Alfred Adler was closely associated with Sigmund Freud and other early pioneers in the fledgling field of modern psychiatry. By the outbreak of World War I the younger doctor could no longer support the narcissistic, pessimistic, self-oriented theory and practice of psychoanalysis. He developed his own positive psychology, and it has been flourishing ever since. What is astonishing is that many modern psychologists have no

knowledge of the enormously effective work of Adlerian psychologists, educators, psychiatrists, counselors, and organizational leaders.

It is important for positive psychologists to know that the theory and practice of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs and their many collaborators provided the first positive psychology and community psychiatry. Adler and Dreikurs emphasized encouragement, well-being, cooperation, and social interest as the foundation of mental health.

The emphasis on health, positive outlook, and socially constructive attitudes and actions that Seligman emphasized, important contributions though these were, failed to underscore that Adler long ago developed these ideas. In his writings on ‘positive psychology’ Seligman (1991; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) did not mention that these ideas were long ago advanced by Adler, Dreikurs, and others. Only cursory mention of Adlerian psychology was made in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Higgins (2002) mentioned Adler on pages 352 and 359 and Mahoney (2002) on pages 746 and 748 mentioned Adler, but the overall pattern is clear. Leaders in the field of Positive Psychology do not seem to appreciate that a significant forerunner existed in their new field, that Alfred Adler from the early 20th century on was writing about the same issues they were. What is more important is that Adlerians developed detailed practical methods for the prevention and treatment of all types of difficulties in human functioning, and positive psychologists have an opportunity to learn these methods and the underlying ideas.

To emphasize prevention and to focus on the necessary aspects of positive human relationships, books are written on encouragement (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1998), marriage (Dreikurs, 1999), parenting (Dreikurs & Soltz, 2006), education of children (Adler, 1930; Dreikurs, Cassel, & Ferguson, 2004; Dreikurs, Grunwald,



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and Pepper, 1999), family guidance and counseling (Grunwald & McAbee, 1999), group counseling and therapy (Sonstegard & Bitter, 2004), and individual therapy (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006). It is noteworthy that the landmark school desegregation case of 'Brown v. Board of Education' was given critical foundation by Kenneth B. Clark (1967) on the basis of the influence of Alfred Adler. Kenneth B. Clark (1967), one time president of the American Psychological Association and the person credited with providing the significant data that persuaded Thurgood Marshall and the United States Supreme Court to eradicate racial segregation in schools, pointed out that the theory of Adler was pivotal in his own thinking. Clark (1967, p.181) said: "Without question, the most significant and persistent influence on my own thoughts and activities as a social psychologist has been the social dynamic theories of Alfred Adler." He further stated (1967, p. 182): "To the extent that Adlerian theory influenced my own thinking and research, and to the extent that my thoughts and writings have influenced in any way the civil rights movement, determines, at least in part, the extent to which ideas of Alfred Adler have contributed to the accelerated quest for racial justice in America."

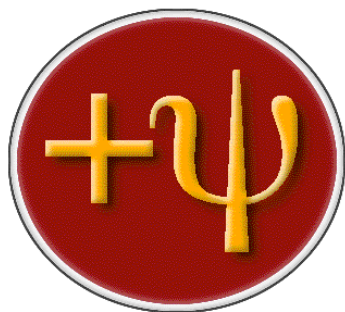
The ideas of Adler have helped change racial relations in the United States and Adlerians have played a significant role in helping bring peace and cooperation in the world. Following World War II, Dreikurs developed Adlerian societies in countries in Europe and the Middle East. There is an active Adlerian society within North America (NASAP, see <http://www.alfredadler.org/>) and there are Adlerian training programs in many countries of the world. An international summer school developed in the early 1960s by Rudolf Dreikurs trains professionals and lay persons each year in a different country. This year, as a rare opportunity for persons living in North America, the 42nd annual ICASSI summer school is taking place in Tennessee July 19 – 31 (see <http://www.icassi.net/> for the full program of courses). Next year's 2010 ICASSI summer school will take place in July in Romania (see <http://www.icassi.net> from September on for costs and courses). Persons attend from over 20 nations. They come to learn the methods and theory of Rudolf Dreikurs and Alfred Adler. The summer school

was described in an APA publication (Ferguson, 2000b). There are courses on all aspects of prevention and treatment that pertain to positive mental health in school, at home, in the workplace, and in international relationships. The international reach is evident in many ways, including the fact that a book by Ferguson (2008) on *Adlerian theory: An introduction*, has been translated into Russian, Bulgarian, Greek, Hebrew, Lithuanian, German, Czech, and the Slovak language.

Adlerians themselves have written about the relationship of Adlerian psychology to Positive Psychology, and some have noted that more needs to be written to bring awareness of this relationship. Richard Watts (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006) on pages 34 to 36 wrote that Adler's influence has not been acknowledged by the main leaders in positive psychology. Leak and Leak (2006) wrote an extensive review of how Adler's concept of 'social interest' is a major predecessor of ideas developed by positive psychology. Social interest, as the foundation of mental health for Adlerians, is a concept that positive psychologists should know, as it is the essence of positive psychology. As described by Leak and Leak (2006, p. 207): "Social interest is based on one's identification with others and a transcendence of self-interest that results in a genuine concern with and striving for community and human welfare."

The writings of Ferguson (1989, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, in press; Serban & Ferguson, in press) highlight the health-promoting aspects of Adlerian psychology that can be of value for practitioners of positive psychology. Adlerian psychology promotes prosocial processes, social equality, cooperation, and encouragement in all arenas of human endeavors. If positive psychology theorists and practitioners wish to become familiar with the writings of Adler (1930, 1931, 1938) and Adlerians, they will find gold mines of wisdoms, principles, and methods. Adlerians have read the writings of positive psychologists. It is now time the latter read the writings of the former.

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