ANTITHETICAL THINKING IN PERSONALITY PROBLEMS

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This paper is a brief review of some of my research and writing, leading to an attempt to show how a general principle which developed out of this work seems to me now to be a readily perceived corollary of what Adler said in different ways about the "individual categorical imperative" (1, p. 444) and the antithetical mode of thinking of neurotics (1, p. 25). I have become aware of this relationship only recently.

UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN COLLEGE

In my experience as a clinical psychologist in a university setting, I observed what seemed to be a consistent pattern of attitudes among high-ability, underachieving college students. An analysis of the cases of four such students (3) suggested the following common attitudes: (*a*) extremely high standards for themselves; (*b*) denial of wholeheartedness in their efforts; (*c*) the belief that they should be able to achieve at a high level with little effort, achieving through hard work being not especially creditable; (*d*) an unwillingness to risk being wrong, being disappointed, doing poorly.

I called the general concept which seemed to include or account for the various attitudes Willingness to Accept Limitations (WAL). My thinking was that all these students were unable to accept the ordinary limitations that go with being human — being imperfect, making mistakes, being disappointed at times. On the contrary their thinking was perfectionistic, absolutist, categorical — "if I am not among the best students, I'm mediocre."

Horney's (9) development of the concept of the idealized image seemed to apply. It included a recognition of the perfectionistic, unrealistically high demands on the self by a self-created image of what one believes oneself to be, or what one feels one can or ought to be. She interpreted the idealized image as having the function of being a substitute for realistic self-confidence and pride. At the same time that the person cherishes the image, he does not really work to achieve it. This fit my notion that these underachieving students preferred to maintain their grandiose conceptions of their abilities, rather than commit themselves to hard study, and risk falling short of the image—

or dared not try for the same reason, and could not make a whole-hearted effort.

I constructed and developed a scale to measure WAL, using statements or their opposites, as similar as possible to what had been said in interviews by students having the described pattern of attitudes. The scale was eventually administered to high ability arts-college men and women and engineering students, all entering freshmen. A matched-pairs method was used to test the hypothesis that, other things being equal, students who score higher on WAL (are more willing to accept ordinary, human limitations as measured by WAL) will make higher grades (4).

The arts-college men who were higher on WAL, the "healthier" end of the continuum, made grades that were very significantly higher than those of their matchmates, after the first academic quarter. Similar trends were found for engineering men and arts-college women, but were not siginficant.

A replication (6) using much larger groups, found significant differences for those in the highest ability range of both men and women in the arts college, but not for high ability engineering students, or lower ability arts-college students.

These studies then give some evidence that certain high ability students who are less perfectionistic, more willing to accept ordinary human imperfections, as measured by the WAL scale, get better grades than those who are more perfectionistic. However, the lack of similar differences among engineering students or lower ability arts-college students still remains to be accounted for.

Personality Problems in General

Gradually in my work with students, I became aware of categorical thinking in relation to many kinds of problems. A student who was insecure socially would imply that he expected everyone to respond positively to him before he could feel that he was socially successful; and if not everyone liked him, he must be a social failure. A young man who was preoccupied with his appearance and insecure about it, aspired for a positive response from the most beautiful and most popular girls; and if the most beautiful girls did not consider him attractive, he must be unattractive.

Consistent with this line of thinking were Wendell Johnson's views concerning the nature of stuttering. He saw it as "what results when normal non-fluency is evaluated as something to be feared and

avoided" (11, p. 452). He went on to say in effect, that the stutterer's conception of acceptable speech is perfectionistic, that either his speech must be perfectly fluent, without normal non-fluency, or he sees himself as a "stutterer."

So it began then to appear that the WAL study dealt with a specific form of categorical thinking in relation to insecurity, and that there were many other forms that might be included under a generalization at a higher level of abstraction.

Consequently I proposed the thesis (7) that many people with problems develop a rigid, categorical way of thinking about what it means to meet the ideals they have for themselves; further, that they do not accept any degree of the opposite of the ideal or, more accurately, what to them would be opposite, anything contrary to the absolute ideal. Thus, a young man whose ideal of masculinity requires that he be "tough" may exclude tenderness and affection, and have a problem in relation to being affectionate with his fiancee. A young man whose ideal is "kindness" and who is loving and accepting may exclude being "aggressive" in his own behalf, and have a problem in competing with others or in developing into an individual in relation to his parents. A wife whose ideal to be "unselfish" requires being concerned with her husband's needs may exclude being concerned with her own needs, so that she has a problem of being able to act in behalf of her own development as a person. Each of the preceding examples is taken from counseling experience. In each case the person thinks in a categorical, absolutist manner, and excludes what seems to be contrary to his ideal, but what more objectively is an acceptable and human way to feel and behave. The difficulty lies in the unreasonably exclusive nature of what it means to fulfill the various ideals.

Here I must mention that I neglected to include in this paper any reference to very similar ideas expressed by Wendell Johnson (11). He also generalized about dichotomous thinking about ideals such as "success-failure," in what he called the "two-valued orientation." Perhaps my neglect was due to seeing the various forms of the phenomenon as they occurred in actual counseling experience, so that they seemed new and different to me. Perhaps my particular way of describing these forms in terms of categorical thinking about what it means in specific ways for a person to reach his ideals, seemed new and different. In any event, it is interesting to note that although Johnson refers to Adler in other regards, he does not make mention of what

Adler said about the categorical nature of neurotic ideals, in relation to his own "two-valued orientation."

Relevance to Adler's Concept

The foregoing is relevant to what Adler has said about the ideals of the neurotic being unreasonably high and rigid. Only, I would hesitate to claim that low scorers on the WAL scale are neurotic, and would prefer to consider unrealistically high and rigid ideals as a stage in normal development up to a point, beyond which they might be considered neurotic. In other words, if a 40-year-old psychologist still demands that what he writes be beyond attack or criticism, I would consider that neurotic. However, in a 19-year-old college student I would not consider the same attitudes and behavior necessarily neurotic, but quite possibly a developmental stage.

In relation to this question, I suggested (7) a view of healthy development in which the (usually non-explicit) task of the individual is the gradually more confident establishment of his own concepts of what is valued, as opposed to the categorical quality of what society says one should be and feel, e.g., "good," "successful," "intelligent," etc. This implies progressive learning of the many different ways in which some degrees of the opposite, or apparent opposite, of categorical thinking about what it means in specific terms to achieve such "ideals," are socially acceptable and human ways of being and feeling.

But this may be quibbling. If we forget about "neurotic" and simply consider the unrealistically high and rigid ideals as a defensive reaction to insecurity in some area, which reaction is eventually self-defeating, then we are back with what Adler said essentially when he stated:

It is the feeling of uncertainty which forces the neurotic to stronger attachment to fictions, guiding principles, ideals, dogmas. These guiding principles float before the normal person also. But to him they are a figure of speech, a device for distinguishing above from below, left from right, right from wrong, and he is not so involved in prejudice that when called upon to make a decision he cannot free himself from the abstract and reckon with reality. Just as little do the phenomena of life resolve themselves for him into strict antitheses, but on the contrary, he is striving constantly to keep his thoughts and actions detached from this unreal principle and to bring them into harmony with reality (1, pp. 29-30).

Elsewhere in the same book, and referring to the development of neuroses and psychoses, Adler says, "The more fixed and rigid their guiding picture, their individual categorical imperative, the more dogmatically they draw the guiding lines of their lives" (1, p. 444). Later on Adler expressed this thought by saying the neurotic feels of

the concrete expressions of his goal, "I must have this or nothing" (2, p. 190). The neurotic's motto is an uncompromising "all or nothing" (2, p. 294).

I was familiar with the idea that neurotics develop unrealistically high and rigid ideals as a defense, from Horney's (9) discussion of the idealized image. I do not know to what extent she was indebted to Adler for the original idea. But the meaning of rigid was not fully clear to me until I had the experience that suggested the WAL study, and the subsequent experience that suggested a more general way of thinking about ideals.

In any event, Adler apparently anticipated what seemed to me a fairly original thought to the effect that insecure people tend to think in categorical, absolutist ways about their ideals for themselves, and have difficulty in accepting some degree of the opposite, or what seems to them opposite, of their ideals.

Further, in the passage quoted above, Adler seems also to have anticipated what I said in my paper (7) about the task of development for the healthy person. I described this task as the gradual establishment of the individual's own concepts of what is valued by himself as opposed to the categorical quality of what society says one should be and feel. In contrasting the normal and the neurotic, Adler seems to be saying essentially the same thing, in describing the normal person as one who does not take ideals literally, but is able to free himself from the abstract ideal and reckon with reality.

More General Implications

Up to this point, I have been describing how, without my being aware of it, Adler had anticipated much of my thinking. This in itself may be interesting, but I believe it also has some more general implications. One of these implications is that our graduate schools do not devote enough time to introducing students to the ideas, not only of Adler, but of others who were influenced by Freud and developed theories or concepts of their own. This would include Horney, Fromm, Jung, Sullivan, Erik Erikson, and probably a number of others. True, the judgment about whom to include would be difficult.

It seems at least a little unfair to evaluate the importance of personality theories according to a criterion of how much research they stimulate (8) when the works of some of these theorists get short shrift in most graduate schools and students are minimally exposed to

their ideas. To come to know them the students would somehow have to get started on their own.

A further related thought is that we need to give students a broader historical perspective on ideas about the nature of man than we do now. Probably our history of psychology courses do this to some extent now, so that we have some appreciation of the fact that in a chapter called "Consciousness of Self", William James (10) long ago anticipated what we now call ego-involvement and self concept. But we need to go beyond the field of psychology or pre-psychology and make use of the wealth of literary, sociological, and philosophical material containing stimulating ideas from the East as well as the West about the nature of man. For example, there are ideas in Zen Buddhism (5) which seem quite clearly to have anticipated basic assumptions in existentialist psychology and in Carl Rogers' writings about the psychotherapeutic relationship.

True again, the task of selection would be difficult, but such difficulty should not discourage us from making a start in the direction of a broader, humanistic, historical approach to insightful ideas about the nature of human beings.

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