

# THE SIBLING INTER-RELATIONS. A PEDAGOGIC PERSPECTIVE ON ALFRED ADLER'S THEORY

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## *Abstract*

*Being written on Alfred Adler's 140 anniversary (1870-2010) this paper deals with a psychological and pedagogical topic that is linked to the spiritual heritage of the founder of individual psychology. My paper is based on one decade of experience during which I was trying to test, while working with my students, at the beginning out of pure curiosity, but then more systematically the validity/invalidity of Adler's hypothesis concerning the influence on the individual of ordinal position of birth within the family.*

*The description of the practical work and of the whole activity during my seminars represents the element of originality of this paper. My conclusions are favourable to Adler's theory: most of the students admit that there are similarities between their own existence and Adler's perspectives upon sibling relationships. I considered that, given, on the one hand, the radical differences between the economic, family and cultural environment of the patients that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – inspired the adlerians studies and, on the other hand, the cultural and family experience of the students I am now working with in Romania, the fortuitous feature of coincidences and similarities is at least questionable.*

## **Psychoanalysis and the un-bewitching of family relations**

In connection with one of the founding myths in the European culture, Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, revealed a psychological phenomenon which he considered universal for the human world: it is, on the one hand, about *the tension between the child and the parent of the same sex* and, on the other hand, about the special attachment between the child and the parent of the other sex. The rivalry and competition among siblings – another source of intra-family tension – made the research object of another psychoanalyst: Alfred Adler.

The problem Adler formulated did not enjoy, in the last century, the notoriety comparable to that of the Oedipus complex formulated by Sigmund Freud. Is this fate deserved?

Personally, I think it is not. According to a sacred text shared by three of the great contemporary religions, the first crime in the history of mankind was neither patricide, nor matricide, but fratricide.

The myth creating intuition of the peoples seems to suggest that the rivalry and competition between siblings are – even more than the filial feelings – sources of intra-family conflict.

### **Alfred Adler's theory about the relation between the place the individual occupies in the succession of siblings and their lifestyle as an adult**

According to Adler, the place the child occupies in the succession of siblings is an aspect of existence that will mark their style of life as an adult. Depending on the child's place in the birth order, Adler distinguishes the following categories:

- the unique child
- the first-born
- the youngest child
- the second child

The connections in which the subject is placed as an effect of their position in the succession of siblings are complex and dynamic. On the one hand, the place in the range of siblings indicates certain statuses with their due roles: it is about what the child expects of their parents and siblings, what their siblings and parents expect by virtue of each their positions in the family constellation. On the other hand, these statuses and roles change in time: the appearance of younger siblings changes the child's relations with their parents and obliges them, to reconsider – most often through painful de-centering – their self-image. Adler's theory is that the place occupied by the individual in the succession of siblings marks their destiny and character.

*The unique child* is, from the beginning and remains all along their development, a “centrum” around which the entire family system gravitates, and this way of being treated will project itself in their expectations towards the others, when an adult. The unique child makes oneself up in an environment in which they will not have to share the attention, or the time, or the giving availability of their parents. That is why, possibly more than in the case of the youngest child, there exists for such a child the risk of being spoiled (the fact that this is about a probability needs mentioning, and it does not have to happen).

*The first born* is the oldest in a succession of siblings with whom they will have to share everything. But, unlike their siblings they go through a time when, being alone, they absorb without any competition the entire attention of the family. Within this first time period they are the absolute master of the “*throne*” their mother's arms provide. However, this exclusivity is temporary: one day they will be overthrown from the throne by the younger sibling. Unless helped to get over this painful moment in their existence, they might understand that, by the

appearance of the second, they have lost their parents' affection, and this feeling may be the basis of unconscious rivalry between/ among siblings.

At the same time with the second child being born, the family expectations towards the first born become more exigent: irrespective of their age, they will become, by comparison to the second one, "big" and will be consequently asked to give, through everything they will do, a positive example, they will be given responsibilities (including that of supervising their brothers and of showing care for them), and the maturing effect will be in accordance with these expectations.

At first, the first born manages without effort to excel and will show the tendency to preserve this advantage. Being given responsibilities at an early age, they will also tend to norm their younger siblings' behavior acquiring a real call for leading, organizing, regulating.

*The youngest child* has no successors and is spared the drama of being overthrown from the throne. But, as of their first steps in life they have to admit their weakness not only before the adults, but also before their elder siblings, whose power has already been installed by the time of their birth. The environment they grow in is competitive, it obliges them to develop and it makes of them an ambitious and dynamic person. When this attitude manifests itself on the useful side of life, the youngest child stands the chance of becoming an outstanding personality, in the good sense, and this fact has been abundantly illustrated by fairy-tales and myths. Though, the reverse is also possible when the attitude of the youngest to show self-importance manifests itself on the negative side of life.

They will show non-conformism and this attitude against rules and principles is the result of a state continuously felt towards their elder siblings whose legitimate authority they have never admitted and who have always shown the tendency to regulate their conduct. As an adult, they will tend to attack the already installed power.

*The second* comes to the world in a family where, since the very beginning, they are not alone. Not having been through the experience of a unique child, they will take it more easily than the first born that it is natural to share any kinds of advantages with the other siblings. The second is for a while on the position of "the youngest", who is allowed to make mistakes, to "not be able", but who, as in the case of the first born, will be dethroned in their turn by a younger sibling.

Sliding towards the non-useful side of life – whether it is about the unique child, the first born, the second, or the youngest – is often linked to the fear of the individual to be in the shadow of their siblings. When the subject loses any hope of obtaining superiority in useful ways, they resort to subterfuge.

## **Pedagogical reevaluation of the theory: illustration of a seminar application with teachers-to-be**

- total time: 100 minutes -

### **1. First part: group activity - 50 minutes**

**1.i.** The students are asked to get into four category groups as follows:

- *Group I:* the unique child – those who have grown up alone, without siblings;
- *Group II:* the first born – those who have had only younger siblings;
- *Group III:* the youngest – those who have had only elder siblings;
- *Group IV:* the second – those who have had both elder and younger siblings;

Each group chooses a *secretary* who will write down the results of the debates and a *reporter* who, at the end, will present these results to the reunited groups.

In case the number of students in a certain category is large, two groups of that category can be made up e (e.g. two groups of *the youngest* – the aim being to make the discussion possible within the group).

**1.ii.** The students will be given around 7-10 minutes to discuss freely within the groups; the students will evoke memories, will exchange opinions, will try to identify those elements which, deriving from their position in the succession of siblings, make their biographies comparable in what they are similar.

The group *secretary* will write down the conclusions of the discussions in two columns – *Advantages* and *Disadvantages* of the condition of being a unique child, first born, second, or youngest.

**1.iii.** The group reporters present the conclusions of each category in front of the reunited groups in terms of *Advantages* and *Disadvantages*. Each group is given about ten minutes for that. The presentations can be supplemented by the group members with factual illustrations from their own biographies.

The presentations will be made in the above-indicated order: unique child, first born, second, and youngest. By observing this order, each position previously presented will help understanding the next position: the first born is a child who has lived for a while – whether they remember or not – the experience of an only child, the second has had for a while the condition of the youngest, but has lost the position, the first born and the second have in common the experience of having been dethroned by the next child, and so on.

Optionally, the conclusions of each group can be posted up so they can be visible to everybody.

The professor-moderator will help through *active listening* the discovery by the students of the similarities and differences so that, at the end, each of them will understand not only the uniqueness of their position in the family constellation, but also the uniqueness of their siblings' experience.

## 2. Second part: debate- 40 minutes

The professor will organize, with the reunited groups, a free debate on the following topic:

**“The ambivalent character of fraternal relationships – exemplary solidarity vs. rivalry”**

Below, we suggest a debate plan that is not meant to be rigid:

**2. i. Rivalry among siblings.** Are there reasons for *rivalry* among siblings originating in their respective positions in the family constellation? What does the suffering of the *first born* consist in when the *second* comes to life? Or that of the *second* when the *youngest* comes to life? Is it right for a child to be made responsible for their younger siblings' fate while a child themselves? What are the frustrations of the youngest resulted from the fact that they grow and develop in a competitive environment in which they are always the last (the last to learn how to lace up their shoes, how to read etc. ..., the last to be asked for their opinion, or whom the family trust)? How is the rivalry between/among siblings *illustrated in the myths*, in literature (see the rivalry among the Olympian god siblings in the Greek mythology, between Romulus and Remus, Abel and Cain, Joseph and brothers, the parable of the wandering son etc.)?

**2. ii. The sibling relationship – moral model for inter-human relationships.** Why, in spite of the rivalry, the brotherly relationship has been at the same time, in all the times, *a moral model* for inter-human relationships? (see the use of the term in Christianity, in the slogan of the French Revolution, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Is it not possible that what is *positive* in the fraternal relationship is the mere *surmounting of rivalry*, the tolerance of the Other's feature of being *different*, the awareness of *common belonging* and the feeling of *solidarity*, the *mutual helping* beyond any competition, the condition of being “for”, more than “with”, the Other one? How is the *positive aspect* of the relationships between/among siblings *illustrated in the myths* and literature (see Castor and Polux, Sophocles' “Antigone” etc.)?

### **2. iii. About the rationality and irrationality of tradition.**

Is there any reason for which, according to tradition, the successor to the throne must be the first born? Is there a reason for which, according to the countrymen's tradition, the father's house is to be inherited by the youngest? Is there a psychological explanation for the sympathy the youngest is introduced with in fairy tales? (see for instance the Romanian fairy tales "The White Moor" by Ion Creangă, "The Brave Last-born and the Golden Apples", "The Salt in the Food" by Petre Ispirescu etc.)

### **3. Third part: reading, reflecting, problematising – communication of work tasks - 10 minutes**

The students are suggested *to read* for the next seminar A. Adler's text from "*Human Knowledge*" referring to the relationships between/among siblings ("*Cunoașterea omului*" Ed. Șt., 1991, pg. 125-131) and *to read* – at their own choice – about a case in A. Adler's book "*The Psychology of the Hard to Educate Child*" ("*Psihologia copilului greu educabil*" Ed. IRI, București, 1995).

The students are suggested "**Child Knowledge through the Prism of Sibling Inter-relations**" as a topic for reflection. The work tasks are indicated below.

#### **3. i. Self-reflective exercise:**

- To what extent has the place I occupy in my family birth order made up my character?
- What are my qualities and shortcomings that result from my position in the family constellation?
- What can I do to intensify the influence of qualities and diminish the influence of shortcomings resulting from my position in the succession of siblings on my present inter-relations with the ones around?
- To what extent does my case differ from the Adler suggested model for the category I belong to?

#### **3.ii. Transfer of self-reflective experience on the educating profession:**

- How can I, as a parent, prevent the escalating of the siblings rivalry?
- What can I find out, as a class adviser, about the children in my class starting from their position in their family birth order?

- What did Adler mean in the following statement: “I respect the principle: everything can be otherwise as well” (see “*What Life Can Mean to You*” translated into Romanian “Sensul vieții”, Ed IRI, 1995, pg 11)? How do we have to apply the psychological knowledge in the analysis of an individual real case: as logical inference of the individual’s characteristics from one’s previous placing into a known category? As a succession of heuristic ways permitting to investigate the individual and to detect one’s uniqueness beyond any category? In another way?

The reading, reflecting, and problematising exercise can be rendered valuable either through a 30 – 60-minute debate in the entire group during the next session or through individually prepared essays by the students to be selectively presented to the group.

### **Usefulness of Application**

1. According to our experience the application has a benefic effect of a *catharsis* and *therapeutic* nature. What can be seen with “the naked eye” is the active involvement of participants and their final satisfaction; at the end of the activity – during which repressed rivalries are openly spoken about, during which they become aware of the objective source of some “injustice” or “guilt”, forgotten and never understood, when the subjects find out that any position, not only their own, has both advantages and disadvantages that the siblings have deeply felt, something like self-forgiving and forgiving of others seems to occur.

2. The knowledge acquired by the participants will be useful in exercising their condition as educators – both within their families and at school as parent counselors.

3. We have found out that the reading of Adler’s texts, *after* a seminar activity designed as above, has a greater impact on the students than in the case the reading precedes the activity: instead of giving them ‘ready-made’ knowledge (possibly *prejudiced ideas*), *the text confirms in most cases what the students have discovered on their own by analyzing their own biographies and the testimony of the others.*

It has often happened that the students wanted to read more of the writings of the founder of individual psychology than those indicated for the strict

purposes of the topic, and that is because, in one way or another, they had found themselves in Adler's work.

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## APPENDIX I

### Alfred Adler- short cronology

- 1870 – is born, in Vienna, Alfred Adler. He is *the second* from a series of six brothers;  
1888-1895 follows the classes of *The Medical School of the Vienna University* and receives his physician diploma;  
1897- marries *Raissa Timofeivna Epstein*, with whom he will have three children;  
1898 – 1902 – begins his private activity, publishes several articles in „The Medical News Bulletin” from Vienna and a monography (*“Health Book for Tailor Trade”*);  
1902 – is invited by Freud to join The Psychanalitic Society, from which he will be excluded nine years later, at the demand of the same Freud;  
1904 – publishes the article *“The doctor as educator”*;  
1905- publishes *"A study of the organ's inferiority"*;  
1911- is excluded from The Psychanalitic Society of Vienna and grounds his own psychanalitic research group that will get, in 1913 the name of „*The Society for Individual Psychology*";  
1912- publishes *“About the neurotic character”*;  
1914 – publishes *“The Healing and Education”* volume;  
1916-1918 is working as *military doctor* during the War;  
1922- publishes *"The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology"* and organises *Educational Consultance* activities;  
1924 – begins his university career as professor at the *Pedagogic Institute from Vienna*;  
1928-publishes „*The case of Miss R: The Interpretation of Life*";  
1929- becomes visiting professor at *Columbia University*; publishes *"Individual Psychology in schools "*, *"Understanding Human Nature"* and *"Child's Guidance: about the principles of the individuals psychology*;

1932- becomes professor at the “*Long Island College of Medicine*” ;  
1933 - publishes “*Religion and Individual Psychology*” and “*The Meaning of Life*”;  
1934 - the Adler’s Individual Psychology Movement from Vienna is being dissolved by the  
    nazist occupation;  
1935 - A.Adler becomes the *mentor* of *A.Maslow*  
1937- the 28th of May, Adler dies in Aberdeen, Scotland.

Translated by Ioana Rogoian, philologist, Cluj- Napoca

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