



## RESEARCH NOTE

# Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology in Light of Classical Persian Literature

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present a tentative analysis of the possible commonalities and differences between Adlerian individual psychology and classical Persian literary texts of the pre-modern period written by mystics Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair, Jami, Saadi, and Rumi. The authors put forward the suggestion that modern psychological approaches, especially those dealing with education of children, might be rooted in the teachings of Iranian mystics. In mysticism and classical Iranian literature, like in Adlerian psychology, much attention is given to human nature in its entirety and personality development. The analysis focuses on such core aspects of Adler's theory as the feeling of inferiority and the striving for recognition, the influence of family and social environment on personality development and lifestyle. It is shown that, like Adler's individual psychology, classical Persian texts stress the importance of the social aspect in the child's development but while Adler believed in the freedom of choice and people's creative power to change their personality structure (lifestyle), the classical Iranian authors emphasized the existence of a certain "true nature" that cannot be influenced by education or social environment. These findings can inspire future research into the possible connections between the holistic personality theories in modern psychology and the philosophical thought in classical Persian literature.

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**Introduction**

In this study, we explore the teachings of Iranian mystics, in particular the texts that deal with personality development and upbringing of children, in light of individual psychology of the Austrian psychotherapist Alfred Adler. Methodologically, the study relies on the descriptive-analytical framework applied to examine the anthropological foundations in Adler's theory (e.g., described in his seminal work *Understanding Human Nature*, 1927) and compare his ideas and concepts with those discussed in classical Iranian literature, more specifically, in the writings by Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair, Jami, Saadi, and Rumi. Since, according to Adler, the most important period of the child's development is before the age of six or seven (Adler, 1927/2000), we selected the poems and anecdotes of these authors that focused on the same age range.

Alfred Adler was among the first to develop a holistic approach to human personality, and his methods of psychotherapy were inextricably connected to a humanistic philosophy of living. Despite the widely criticized drawbacks of Adlerian theory such as the lack of empirical evidence, we cannot deny the fact that his work pioneered attention to mental health, community life, and prevention of mental illnesses, "bringing people together with its emphasis on the healing power of connection" (McCluskey, 2022). Moreover, Adler's work offered some valuable insights into the reasons behind people's discouragement in life, the feelings of inferiority and disconnection. His theory sheds light on how a child may form what he referred to as a "mistaken" lifestyle because of abuse and neglect and poor family guidance they face (McCluskey, 2022).

Like Adler, classical Iranian authors offer a holistic understanding of moral and spiritual growth and personality development. Persian literature is a treasure of narratives seeking to engage their readers with a variety of ethical and philosophical questions such as destiny and human effort, the objectives of human life, guilt, virtue, justice, striving for perfection, and so on. In a condensed, sometimes allegoric form, these didactic tales, anecdotes, and poems convey the most important concepts of Persian moral thought.

This paper is structured as follows. In the following section the general theoretical background is outlined, providing the overview of Adler's individual psychology and the writings of pre-modern Persian mystics. The Results and Discussion section analyzes specific examples of their texts and draws parallels with the key principles and concepts of Adlerian psychology. The Conclusion section summarizes our findings and highlights avenues for further research.

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## Theoretical Background

In Adler's view, each person is a unique, indivisible, and complete entity endowed with a creative power to shape their own destiny (Hashemlou, 2017). Adler's concept of human nature does not portray individuals as victims of instincts and conflicts, doomed to serve as a playground of biological forces and childhood experiences (Schultz, 2012).

Adler's approach is based on a social perspective on human nature: in his opinion, a person's fundamental motivation is social in character and stems from a strong desire to be part of human society. In other words, human behavior is developed within a certain social context, which should be taken into account in psychotherapy. Since the basic desire of every person is to belong, people can fulfill themselves and become significant only within a social context. In Adlerian philosophy, a person is seen primarily as a being having the capacity for cooperation and collaboration as well as the ability for self-improvement, growth, self-realization, and meaningful participation in social life. Adler used the concept of "social interest" or "community feeling" (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*) to denote a complex process involving empathy and cognitive processes: it is a developmental process which starts when a person first needs "the aptitude for social living and cooperation with others", after a while this aptitude evolves into the person's ability to "comprehend and show empathy for others", and, finally, it turns into a "subjective, evaluative attitude determining choices and the interactions the person has with others" (Ansbacher, 1991). The development of social interest is the ultimate expression of striving for superiority (Carducci, 2009).

Lifestyle or *style of life (Lebensstil)* is another important concept in Adlerian psychology. It refers to a collection of convictions, beliefs, and behavioral patterns that a person develops in their childhood and uses to navigate their further life. In Adlerian psychology, a person's lifestyle is expected to be formed by the age of six or seven—lifestyle is constructed depending on the person's social interactions, the order of birth in the family, and the nature of the parent-child relationship (Schultz, 2012). The key factor in the formation of a lifestyle is the child's early interactions within their initial social environment (parents, siblings, and other family members).

Adler identified four basic types: the social useful type, the ruling type, the getting type, and the avoiding type lifestyles (Adler, 1929). In this classification scheme, only the social useful type is a constructive type, the other three types are destructive (Ryckman, 2004). The avoiding type, for example, lacks the confidence for solving problems and thus, instead of dealing with the problem, prefers to sidestep, avoiding defeat (Ryckman, 2004). The conflict between a person's lifestyle and reality leads to abnormal, self-defeating behavior that manifests itself in the form of neurosis and psychosis.

Adler was among the first to put forward the idea that the *birth order* has a significant impact on the formation of a given person's lifestyle. He believed that it correlates with positive or negative life outcomes (Eckstein et al., 2010). Adler explained that, of course, it is not the child's number in the order of successive births which influences the character, but the *situation*, into which the child is born and the

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way of its interpretation (Adler, 1929/2006). This means that Adlerians are not so much interested in the ordinal birth position but in psychological birth order or the role which the child adopts in their interactions with others (Eckstein et al., 2010).

In Adlerian psychology, all human behavior is goal-orientated and motivated by *striving for superiority*. Individuals may differ in their goals and in the ways of achieving them. Striving for superiority is the natural human desire to move from a perceived negative position to a perceived positive one (Watts, 2012). It stems from the feelings of inferiority (*Minderwertigkeitsgefühl*) or the feelings of disempowerment and insignificance that the child experiences, because at the beginning of every psychological life there is a more or less deep inferiority feeling (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). A natural and healthy reaction to inferiority is compensation, that is, efforts to overcome real or imaged inferiority by developing one's own abilities. Unlike the normal feelings of inferiority, however, *inferiority complexes* result from a person being unable to compensate for their inferiority. Thus, an inferiority complex tends to paralyze people instead of motivating them to seek self-improvement. The overarching goal of Adlerian psychotherapy is, therefore, to help the patient develop healthy ways of overcoming their feelings of inferiority through what Adlerians call "encouragement" or the therapeutic modeling of social interest (Hoffman, 2022; Watts, 2012).

Texts written by Iranian mystics place much emphasis on the cultivation of moral virtues, philosophical and religious values, the perfection of beauty and knowledge. These authors attached great importance to literature's function as a medium of education and enlightenment (Sarfai & Esfandiari, 2012). The genre of educational poetry is a perfect illustration of the belief that the poet's main goal should be to teach wisdom and ethics as well as to dissect and explain religious issues and ideas, philosophical and educational themes (Yalameha, 2011).

*Mystical literature* includes a diversity of forms and genres, both in prose and poetry. A large part of Persian literature deals with Sufism, mysticism, and the basics of conduct. The emergence and evolution of mystical literature coincided with the rule of the Ghaznavid, Seljuk, and Mongol Turks in Iran. The verses attributed to Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair, which are mostly quatrains, the poems of Khwaja Abdullah Ansari (1006–1088) and the couplets of Baba Tahir (947–1032) are among the most famous Sufi and mystical poems of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, which are in fact the introduction to the great mystical poems of Sana'i Ghaznavi (1080–1141) of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the following works. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Sana'i mixed mysticism and Sufism with Persian poetry, brought about a great transformation, and the mystical poetry literature was officially founded. Fariduddin Abu Hamid Mohammad Attar Neishabouri (1146–1221), a famous mystic and poet, continued this tradition, and in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, mystical literature reached its perfection and glory in the poetry of Rumi and other authors. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) combined mysticism and enlightenment wisdom to impart a scientific attitude and gave Sufism and mysticism an aspect and reasoning. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, systematic scientific Sufism was taught; Sufism and Shi'ism became close to each other, and found their perfect embodiment in the writings of Hafez Shirazi (1326–1389) (Sajjadi, 1997).

In mystical literature, there is a distinct type of poetry that is of special relevance to this study: it is *didactic poetry* (or educational poems). While lyrical poems are intended primarily to express the poet's feelings and emotions, didactic poems were created for the purpose of education (Shafii Kadkani, 2007), these texts could be used to teach disciples and people who were attracted to Sufi teachings.

The great Iranian reformers and mystics included in this analysis are Abu Sa'ïd Fazlullah ibn Abu al-Khair Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim known as "Sheikh Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair" (967–1049), sage Abu Muhammad Elias Ibn Yusuf ibn Zaki Ibn Muayyid "Nizami" (1141–1209), Musharraf al-Din Mosleh ibn Abdullah Shirazi alias "Saadi" (1209–1291), Maulana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi known as "Rumi" (1207–1273), Nooruddin Abdul Rahman Ibn Nizamuddin Ahmad Ibn Mohammad alias "Jami" (1414–1492) (Sarfi & Esfandiari, 2011).

## Results and Discussion

In our analysis, we are going to concentrate on the following three ideas in Adler's writings that most resonate with moral and educational philosophy found in classical Persian literary texts:

- (a) the feeling of inferiority and the striving for recognition;
- (b) the influence of the social environment on the child's early development;
- (c) the origin of human personality, parental influence and the influence of education.

Let us now look at each of these aspects in greater detail.

### ***The Feeling of Inferiority and the Striving for Recognition***

In the story about the childhood of Sheikh Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair (967–1049), we find the following:

One night Babu Abu al-Khair went to their dervishes at their invitation, and the sheikh's mother begged him to take Abu Saeed with him so that the opinion of his loved ones and dervishes would fall on him; Baba Abolkhair took the sheikh with him. When they were preoccupied with Sama, the singer sang the anthem of this verse. (Monavvar, ca. 1174 B.C./1992; transl. by Nazyar Khamenehei [N. K.]

The manner of treatment of a child in the family, by parents and other adults affects the process in which their feelings of inferiority are formed, thus also affecting their future adult life. This story describes the child's experience of visiting the dervishes with his father, which contributed to his development and resulted in Sheikh Abu Saeed Abu al-Khair becoming one of the greatest Iranian mystics and thinkers.

Another story worthy of interest is found in the writings of Sheikh Jalaluddin Mohammad Rumi nicknamed "Rumi" (1207–1273):

The child's name was Mohammad, but at home they respectfully and lovingly called him Jalal-al-Din, Mawlana. His father, Baha'-al-Din Valad, who was a great orator at Balkh and a renowned preacher and religious teacher there, called his son "Khodavandgar"<sup>1</sup>, out of love and great esteem for him. (Zarrinkoub, 2009)

This text is reminiscent of the following part of Adler's text:

Because every child has to grow up in an adult environment, he sees himself as a weak, small person, unable to live alone, and not even self-confident in doing small and insignificant things. Mistakes in education also results from this concept. Thus, some other children are treated as property and valuables that must be carefully cared for, and some children are treated in a way that makes them feel like useless creatures. (Adler, 1927, p. 30)

### ***The Influence of the Social Environment on the Child's Early Development***

The book *Makhzan al-Asrar* (1173) written by "Nizami" Ganjavi contains the following story:

The child of a nobleman went out with some others of his own age. As he was running, he fell down, his happiness was destroyed, and his backbone was broken. The distress of his companions was greater than the calamity which had befallen him. He who was his best friend said: "We must hide him in the bottom of a well, so that the secret may not be as manifest as the sun; and so that we should not be ashamed before his father". The wisest child among them was his enemy. He said: "Surely the matter will not be kept a secret by his company. Since they consider me to be his enemy, they will lay the blame for this misfortune upon me". He went to his father and informed him of the accident, so that the father could resolve the matter. He who possesses the jewel of wisdom is able to do everything. (Nizami, 1173/1945; transl. by Gh. H. Darab)

This story may be seen as an illustration of how social interactions (in this case collective and individual decision-making) shape the child's personality as the child seeks to obtain love and respect from those they interacts with (Adler, 1927). This story also correlates with the following part of Adler's theory: the child, like adults, wants to overtake their rivals. The child's objective is to attain the level of supremacy that will both ensure their safety and help them achieve their chosen purpose. The child has an optimistic belief that they can solve their difficulties quickly. Solving tasks and overcoming difficulties is an important part of personality development as the child gains confidence in the process.

Another interesting example to be considered here is the verses from *Bustan Saadi* (1257) written by Saa'di Shirazi:

<sup>1</sup> The word *Khodavandgar* means "creator" and "lord" in the Persian language and is used as an address of respect (Ferdowsi, 1957).

If thou desire that thy name should remain, train thy son in knowledge and wisdom, for if he possesses not these, thou deist obscure, with no one to commemorate thy name.

Teach him a handicraft, though thou be as rich as Korah. Place no hope in the power that thou hast—riches may go from thee. A bag of silver and gold is emptied; the purse of an artisan remains filled.

Dost thou not know how Sadi attained to rank? He journeyed not over the plains, nor crossed the seas. In his youth he served under the yoke of the learned: God granted him distinction in after-life. It is not long before he who serves obtains command.

A boy who suffers not at the hands of his teacher suffers at the hands of Time. Make thy son good and independent, so that he may not be beholden to any man. Protect him from evil associates; and pity him not if he brings ruin and destruction upon himself, for it is better that a vicious son should die before his father. (Saa'di Shirazi, 1257 B. C./1911; transl. by A. H. Edwards)

All children, slowly, from an early age, realize that some people can fully satisfy their desires and are better prepared for life. If the parents' love for their children is not adequate, it may cause problems in the child's development and they may be facing serious psychological difficulties in adult life. Due to the lack of flourishing desire to love in the child, their point of view is so proven that they cannot know love or affection and use it properly. The basis of educability is that the child tries to compensate for their weaknesses in this way, when a feeling of inadequacy arises in the child, hundreds of talents and abilities appear in them. Education that is accompanied by excessive love is as dangerous as education under pressure and coercion. A child who is a mollycoddle, just like a child who was hated by their parents, is facing huge problems. The classification of children begins from childhood. While some children seek the power to choose a bold approach that leads to their recognition, other children seem to meditate on their weaknesses and try to express them in different ways. Obstacles that the child faces in their mental development usually leads to deviation and hinder the development of feelings of cooperation. These barriers are divided into two categories, one that arises due to the shortcomings of their physical environment, such as those that are rooted in the child's abnormal relationships in socio-racial or familial economic situations. The second category is the barriers that result from the disability of the individual limbs (Adler, 1927).

### ***The Origin of Human Personality, Parental Influence, and the Influence of Education***

In *Masnawi Haft Awrang* (written in 1468) by "Jami" (1390–1466), we can read the following "story of the little boy who was holding big bread, eating and crying that this bread is small and I have a big appetite":

The clever speed messenger went to Baghdad; he saw a child. The child's face was rounder than the moon, and he held a loaf of bread, which was round like his

own face. He was eating bread and crying. The man said to him: "Why are you crying?" The child said: "I am a lonely child who has only one hungry stomach from the table of the world. I'm very hungry and this is small bread. How can I get rid of my hunger with this bread? I cry for this because I know this bread will be gone soon. I will be without food again, I will neither have bread in my hand nor a full stomach". (Jami, 1468 B.C./1997; transl. by N. K.)

Looking at Adler's theory, the above story can be analyzed as follows: the exact opposite of optimistic people are pessimistic people. These are the people with whom we have the biggest educational problems. This pessimistic philosophy of childhood abuse always looks at the dark side of life. He also makes the following points when it comes to adapting to untamed instincts: there are people who show a trait that we can call rudeness or lack of culture. People who chew their fingernails or put their fingers in their noses all the time, and people who throw themselves on food as if they have no choice but to eat, belong to this group. These symbols are clear, and when we look at such a person, we see that they attack food like a hungry wolf, and because they know that no one can stop them, they are not ashamed to show their hunger. How loudly they eat; what morsels that it is not clear where it fits in the stomach; how fast they eat; how many times have you seen people get upset if their mouth doesn't move constantly? Overall, child savagery and bad habits of children are commonly used to attract the attention of adults. Children who want to have a bigger plan or show their adults how weak and helpless they are will resort to these things. The common denominator of all of them is that they mistreat when they see a stranger, and these abuses have only one similar meaning (Adler, 1927).

The following verses from "Rumi" in the book *Koliyat Shams-E Tabrizi* illustrate the influence of the family and upbringing on the child's development. They compare the wrath of the prophets of God to mother's anger towards her child, which contributes to the latter's development and goes hand in hand with compassion and kindness:

The wrath of the prophets is like the wrath of a mother, a wrath full of patience for her beautiful child. This anger is like lightning that strikes the ground and causes the flowers of Nasrin, Lily, and the hundred-leafed and fragrant flower to grow. (Rumi, ca. 1260 B.C./1996; transl. by N. K.)

The same view and emphasis on the role of the mother in the family and society in educating and shaping the child's lifestyle at an early age and choosing their future path is evident in Adler's theory: he pointed out the importance of the mother as the first person the child has a relationship with and as the person who teaches the child the skills of cooperation and association. Only if children feel related to others can they boldly cope with life's problems. Rumi writes about the mother raising her child: even if she shows anger towards the child in the process of upbringing, this anger, like the wrath of the prophets of God, goes hand in hand with compassion and kindness and thus can be compared to a garden where the gardener hoes the earth so that beautiful flowers could grow. A comparable idea finds reflection



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in the Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's views on the mother-child relationship, which is considered "fundamental for the healthy development of the child" (Brühlmeier, n.d.). The mother, shaping the child's attitude to the future world, is close to her child in all kinds of activities.

Another interesting fragment is the following anecdote from *Gulistan* written by Saadi:

One of the ministers had a foolish son. He sent him to a scientist and said, "Train my son so that he may be wise". The scientist taught the child for a while but it was not effective, so he sent someone to his father and said: "Your son will not be wise and he drives me crazy". When a nature is originally receptive, instruction will take effect afterwards. No kind of polishing will improve iron whose essence is originally bad. Wash a dog in the seven oceans, it will be only dirtier when it gets wet. If the ass of Jesus be taken to Mekkah, on its return it will still be an ass. (Saa'di Shirazi, 1257 B.C./2010)

In contrast to Saadi's idea about the underlying reality or the "true nature" of a child that cannot be changed, Adler's psychology centers around the idea of freedom of choice and personal responsibility for the choices we make. According to Adler, we have control over our destiny and we are not its victims. Lifestyle, though formed in early childhood and affected by heredity and environment, can be modified through "creative power" or "striving power", which is a major intervening variable (Edgar, 1985). As Adler explains, "this creative power, the foundation of a striving life, must be considered as much more important than our capacities, what we inherit, or the impressions we receive" (Adler, 1929/2006, p. 29). It is the way people interpret the external influences that forms the basis of the creative structure of their attitude toward life (Schultz, 2012). Adler places creative power in the center of human personality development, seeing it as the ability of individuals to shape their own lives and destinies, and it is this idea that was later used in Abraham Maslow's theory (Jones-Smith, 2016).

As the above-described examples have shown, the texts of classical Persian literature have some remarkable common points with Adlerian psychology. In mysticism and classical Iranian literature, like in Adlerian psychology, much attention is given to human nature in its entirety and to the methods of educating human beings. It should be noted, however, that since this research note focuses on Persian poems and prose that have roots in Sufism and Islam, caution should be exercised when extrapolating the findings to a wider field and further in-depth research should be carried out. There is, however, one important difference between Adlerian understanding of human psyche and that of classical Iranian authors: while Adler believed in the freedom of choice and people's power to change their personality structure (lifestyle), Iranian authors emphasized the existence of a certain core of the personality or the person's "true nature" that is manifested in childhood and cannot be influenced by education or social environment.

## Conclusion

In this paper our aim was to put forward the suggestion that modern psychological approaches, especially those dealing with education of children, have parallels in the teachings of Iranian mystics. Mysticism and classical Persian literature, like Adlerian psychology, considers matters of personality development and in particular the influence of education and family upbringing. Our analysis of the key points of Adlerian psychology has shown that many of his ideas about the role that family, relationships with parents and other family members, and the immediate social environment play in the child's development were given equal attention by the Iranian mystics. We believe that our findings may stimulate further discussion on these questions and thus bring new insights into the roots of modern psychology.

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