

Justice as a Lifestyle: A Qualitative Single-Case Study on the Maturation of a Socially Critical Social Interest Despite Biographical Traumas

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ABSTRACT – This hermeneutic-teleological single-case study examines the development of a principle-guided value orientation from the perspective of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology. Using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) of a corpus of written self-reflections from a patient aged 65–70, the study investigates how early childhood memories operate teleologically in lifestyle formation. The analysis demonstrates how biographical burdens, somatic limitations, and experiences of powerlessness can lead to a fictional intention of structural autonomy and systemic vigilance. Over the course of the psychotherapeutic process, these safeguarding mechanisms are functionally modified and transformed into a matured, socio-critical social interest. The findings show how biographical injuries can be productively converted into emancipatory resources, offering practical implications for psychotherapy and psychosocial work with highly value-oriented individuals.

Keywords:

Adlerian psychology; Individual psychology; Social interest; Early recollections; Childhood trauma; Qualitative case study; Lifestyle development

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Introduction

Theoretical Framework: The Psychodynamic Architecture of the Lifestyle

Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology (1927, 1933) views human personality as an all-encompassing, goal-oriented unity. At the center of this approach is the individual lifestyle. It describes the specific way a person perceives their environment, as well as how they think, feel, and act. This lifestyle results from the child's dynamic interaction with their environment during the first years of life and can be modified throughout adulthood. Adler (1933) emphasizes the teleological (goal-directed) function of human behavior: "We cannot understand the expressions of a human being unless we grasp them as currents running toward a constant direction and a fixed goal". The lifestyle thus serves the pursuit of a subjectively defined life goal, shaped under the strong influence of the individual's biographical and situational conditions.

Crucial to the formation of this lifestyle is social interest (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), which every human possesses as an innate disposition, and which individually unfolds or diminishes over time. It manifests as the capacity and willingness to connect with others, contribute to the welfare of the community, and master challenges in the interest of the collective. A central element in researching this lifestyle is the analysis of early memories. These function as a subjective "guideline". They reflect which experiences the individual has evaluated as formative and significant, thereby pointing to the unconscious fundamental assumptions upon which the individual lifestyle is constructed.

From Adler's perspective, memories are not objective, historical chronicles of the past, but rather expressions of individual perceptual and evaluative patterns (apperceptions). The individual unconsciously selects past events, remembers them, and reconstructs them in a way that legitimizes their current lifestyle, warns against dangers, and serves as a teleological guide for present and future coping strategies (Adler, 1931). Memories do not explain causally why a person became who they are; rather, they explain phenomenologically by showing for what purpose they maintain certain psychological safeguarding tendencies in the here and now.

In addition to direct parental educational influences, the child's subjective developmental space is substantially structured by the sibling constellation and the dynamics of the family system (Adler, 1933). The subjectively experienced position within the birth order defines the specific social experiential space in which the child seeks and shapes their place, recognition, and existential belonging.

In clinical diagnostics (DSM-5/ICD-11), adherence to principles, perfectionism, or a need for control are often classified as anankastic or obsessive-compulsive traits. In contrast, Individual Psychology emphasizes their functional significance: such patterns serve as compensatory strategies against experiences of powerlessness (Adler, 1933). A functional perspective interprets these phenomena differently: here, they act as constructive, structure-giving compensatory mechanisms. With them, the child attempts to fend off an omnipresent feeling of powerlessness or early shame by building an individual, incorruptible value system. From an Adlerian viewpoint, social interest is not exhausted by blind, conformist adaptation to the existing order; instead, it can be understood to contain a creative, shaping component that uncovers injustices and arbitrariness in the system and channels them into socially productive directions.

The genesis of a rigid sense of justice is closely linked to early compensatory efforts. When the family microcosm is characterized by arbitrariness or powerlessness, the child often constructs an incorruptible, overcompensatory value system. Phenomena such as shame, organ inferiority, or a burdensome sibling dynamic are not isolated; they form the biographical foundation upon which the later pursuit of systemic justice teleologically builds as a lifestyle.

The Present Study and Research Questions

Based on these theoretical foundations, the aim of this study is to investigate how a rigid, value-oriented sense of justice develops as a subjective lifestyle pattern following early traumatic experiences. Specifically, this research addresses the following question: How can early childhood experiences of powerlessness and somatic limitations be teleologically transformed into a matured, socio-critical social interest?

Method

Case Selection and Participant Profile

The participant, Thomas W. (aged 65–70), was selected through purposive sampling as an information-rich case (Yin, 2014). He presented a highly distinct, principle-guided lifestyle centered around structural justice, following a history of cumulative childhood trauma and somatic limitations, making his biography uniquely suited for exploring individual psychological value transformation.

In his adult life, Thomas W. worked for decades as a teacher, focusing on the education and support of disadvantaged students. In this role, his early vigilance and striving for autonomy developed into professional diligence and a lasting commitment to social justice.

Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data corpus comprises comprehensive written self-reflections, generated as ego-documents during the psychotherapeutic process. The data analysis followed a combined deductive-inductive framework of qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018), with the structural steps for ensuring coding quality and validity cross-referenced with the guidelines of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The overarching deductive categories were derived from core individual psychological concepts: inferiority feeling, compensation, fictional final goal, and social interest. Through iterative, open coding, these categories were continuously refined so that inductive behavioral subcategories—such as "systemic vigilance" and "heroic self-presentation"—organically emerged from the textual material.

Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Data collection took place within a psychotherapeutic setting in which the author functioned as the practitioner. To minimize the influence of confirmation bias and ensure intersubjective validation, the coding process and case interpretations were consistently subjected to external supervision and peer debriefing sessions with two independent individual psychological scholars.

Results

Phenomenological Reconstruction of Childhood Memories Based on Ego-Documents

Rickets and Funnel Chest (Ages 2–3)

"The rickets I contracted due to cramped, dark living conditions left behind a permanent funnel chest. In the swimming pool, I felt so uncomfortable because of the anticipated stares from other children that at some point, I stopped going altogether. Although my mother tried to calm me down, the situation was very distressing for me at the time."

Description of the Episode. The episode describes an early experience of physical vulnerability, the anticipation of social exclusion, and a feeling of isolation in the face of parental downplaying. It documents the phenomenon of organ inferiority and the resulting deep feeling of inferiority, as described by Adler (1907, 1927).

Eardrum Perforation and Hearing Impairment (Age 3)

"When I was three years old, I had a severe middle ear infection. The doctor had to pierce my eardrum to drain the pus. After that, I could barely hear anything in my right ear, which, however, also proved very useful to me. I could always cite my hearing impairment whenever I wanted to evade my mother's concrete instructions. Furthermore, it enabled me to bypass military service."

Description of the Episode. In alignment with Adler's (1931, 1933) Individual Psychology, this somatic limitation was functionalized as an unconscious safeguarding tendency to evade maternal demands and, later, state-institutional requirements such as military service.

Maternal External Determination at the Carnival Festival (Ages 3–4)

"For Carnival, my mother dressed me up as my brother's 'bride'. I resisted, but she insisted. Then she even had my ears pierced so that I would look like a real Turkish bride. The year

before, she had dressed me up as a devil—and won a prize with it. In the role of the devil, I felt humiliated."

Description of the Episode. Through qualitative content analysis, according to Kuckartz (2018), this experience was reconstructed as the origin of an over compensatory value system built to fend off omnipresent powerlessness. The report describes an experience of maternally dictated external control, the perceived deprivation of one's own autonomy, and feelings of humiliation within the context of family stagings.

Subordinate Sibling Position (Ages 4–6)

"My brother was 1.5 years older than me. Because he was older, he was allowed to help out in the grocery store and operate the cash register when our mother wasn't there. I mostly just stood next to him and had no task. She probably didn't trust me to do it, but I must admit, I was also clumsier."

Description of the Episode. This experience reflects Adler's (1933) theoretical tenets regarding how the sibling constellation and the subjectively experienced birth order shape a child's social experiential space. The episode describes the observation of brotherly privileges in the mother's shop in contrast to one's own passivity and a self-perceived lack of skill.

Separation and Relocation to the Grandparents (Age ~4)

"One day, my mother informed me that I would be traveling with my brother to a major city to stay with my grandparents. I didn't know these grandparents (maternal side). I had never seen them before. Therefore, I assumed it was a short trip with my parents. So my mother and my brother took the train with me to the city—about 100 km away. My grandfather was already very old back then, with many deep wrinkles on his face. My grandmother was emotionally reserved, a very good cook, but eaten away by superstition, as I later discovered. If ravens appeared nearby, she chased them away because she believed they always appeared where someone would soon die. Additionally, she had forbidden my grandfather from cutting his nails after his weekly bath because she believed the spirits would come then. Consequently, he had to cut his nails when they were much too hard. My mother then came into her parents' apartment and explained to us children where we would sleep. That was very strange because my mother said goodbye the next day and left us behind alone. It would take more than two years before my parents followed. During those two years, my parents visited us twice at most. There was no telephone and only rarely a letter from my mother. But on the other hand, there were no cell phones back then, and neither my parents nor my grandparents had a phone. I liked my grandfather very much, even though he was sometimes very brusque and authoritarian. He offered me a secure anchor that I could rely on."

Description of the Episode. While the grandmother was experienced as emotionally distant and superstitious, the brusque but reliable grandfather offered a vital source of structure. From an Adlerian perspective (Adler, 1933), this disruption of relationship constancy forces the ego into defense patterns and serves as the foundation for a creative counterreaction to protect the individual.

The Daisy Episode (Age ~5)

"During one of the parents' visits, we all went for a walk: mother, father, grandparents, and brother. And there, on a meadow, I saw a massive quantity of daisies. I began to pick them. I wanted to bring joy to my mother (and only her) and collected many flowers, creating a beautiful bouquet of small blossoms. I secretly hoped my mother would be happy. But when I looked up, everyone was gone. No one was to be seen. And I panicked. When I turned the corner,

I saw them. They were strolling along and hadn't missed me. In that moment, a cramp, a sob, a feeling of abandonment overcame me. I ran toward my mother, but instead of giving her the small bouquet, I threw it at her feet. I was angry and so infinitely sad."

Description of the Episode. The memory displays the sudden falling behind the walking family, the experience of acute emotional distress at the moment of separation, and the subsequent impulsive rejection of a relational offer by throwing the picked flowers at her feet. Adler (1912) introduced the concept of safeguarding tendencies here. These describe unconscious psychological protective and defense mechanisms. A wounded individual deploys them to protect their threatened self-esteem from disappointment or failure. The aggressive throwing down of the flowers serves exactly as such a neurotic "safeguarding arrangement".

The Rübezahl Myth (Age 3)

"My parents told me that the giant Rübezahl lived behind the mountain behind our house. He would take away children who were not good. The kitchen had a window facing the mountain—therefore, the kitchen was a place of danger for me. Before entering it, I always peered through the slightly open crack of the door to see if Rübezahl was there. And I only stayed as long as was absolutely necessary."

Description of the Episode. The described childhood memory exemplifies the emergence of unconscious protective and coping mechanisms resulting from parental educational errors. The invention of a threat by the giant Rübezahl represents a classic parentally induced anxiety structure that, in the sense of Adler (1930), can lead to a profound discouragement of the child. Instead of promoting a sense of security and basic trust in the environment, the domestic kitchen is experienced as a permanent danger zone. This blocks the healthy development of the child's social interest and forces the ego to selectively perceive the world as a hostile "enemy territory". The child, however, does not remain in passive powerlessness but develops an active counterreaction: peering cautiously through the slightly open door crack functions as controlling search behavior for the purpose of autonomous danger assessment. In Individual Psychology, this behavioral pattern is classified as a safeguarding tendency (safeguarding arrangement) (Adler, 1912). Through independent verification of the situation, the child makes a compensatory attempt to master unpredictable parental arbitrariness and existential anxiety, thereby regaining a fictional autonomy and environmental control (Adler, 1912).

The Snapped Cord and the Experience of Shame (Ages 3–4)

"We all slept in one room—the parents in the double bed, my brother and I in our own bed at the edge of the room. After much pleading, we were allowed to switch with our parents once, so that my brother and I could sleep in the double bed. From the ceiling hung a naked light bulb without a lampshade, which could be turned on and off via a simple cord. That evening—after intensive begging—I was allowed to turn off the light, which made me very happy. However, since I could not initially muster the necessary strength and feared the certain mockery of my brother, I pulled with all my might until the cord snapped. A loud groan from my father and brother regarding my clumsiness followed promptly, intensifying my humiliation and the associated feelings of shame."

Description of the Episode. *The striving for significance and autonomy:* The intensively expressed request to turn off the light stems from the child's need for competence and recognition within the family (Adler, 1933). It is the attempt of a "deed of significance" (*Geltungstat*) to demonstrate independence and power over the environment.

The Sibling Constellation as a Threat. The older brother functions here as a direct figure of superiority (Adler, 1933). The acute fear of his "certain mockery" generates immense psychological pressure, driving the child to an uncontrolled, excessive exertion of force.

Reinforcement of the Feeling of Inferiority. The mishap (the snapped cord) and the prompt social devaluation through the groaning of the father and brother transform the proud moment into a deep humiliation. From an Adlerian perspective, this parental and brotherly mockery solidifies the child's feeling of inferiority and links action within the family space to intense shame (Adler, 1927).

Teleological Compensation in the Lifestyle. This experience of powerlessness and exposure contributes significantly to the patient's later lifestyle. In order to never feel so defenseless and inferior again, as an adult, he develops an almost incorruptible, flawless system of argumentation to remain independent of authoritarian institutions.

The Iron Pipe Episode in the Backyard (Age ~3–4)

"We were playing soccer in the backyard. An older boy climbed onto a shed and threatened to throw an iron pipe at us. All the other children ran away—but I stood still. I didn't want to look like a coward. Then the pipe hit me on the head. I bled heavily; my mother took me to the doctor on her bicycle, who provided me with a massive bandage and told me I had been very lucky. If the pipe had struck just one millimeter elsewhere, I would not have survived the incident. Back home, sitting at the window with my head bandaged, I sang loudly—I felt like a hero, and everyone was supposed to see it."

Description of the Episode. The behavior in the iron pipe episode demonstrates Adlerian mechanisms of psychological compensation. Standing still despite the threat fends off an impending feeling of inferiority (Adler, 1927). The child refuses under any circumstances to be deemed a coward. The staging as a wounded hero at the window reverses powerlessness into superiority (Adler, 1912).

Teleologically considered, this heroic behavioral pattern functions as a protective space for vulnerable self-esteem. In the psychotherapeutic process, this rigid need for protection transforms productively. The original striving for significance matures into a socio-critical social interest (Adler, 1933). The adult patient utilizes his biographical vulnerability emancipatorically for the social community.

Discussion

The Individual Psychological Classification and Metamorphosis of the Lifestyle

To ensure a methodically rigorous reconstruction, the phenomena descriptively presented in the results are now systematically synthesized from an individual psychological perspective. The evaluation of childhood memories suggests that the development of the "justice" lifestyle was significantly shaped by a dynamic triad of organ inferiority, a family scapegoat role, and compensatory autonomy.

From the Feeling of Organ Inferiority to the Moral Protective Space

The irreversible somatic changes caused by rickets and the eardrum perforation establish a deeply anchored feeling of organ inferiority in the Adlerian sense. The sensory and motor limitation can be interpreted as undergoing a teleological functionalization: while the hearing impairment is used as an unconscious safeguarding tendency to evade maternal demands and military service, the physical deficit leads compensatorily to the construction of a psychological protective space characterized by high moral integrity and a pursued unassailability.

From Maternal External Control and the Scapegoat Role to the Creative Counterreaction

The profound objectification (carnival festival) and the unannounced external placement with the grandparents disrupt the child's relationship constancy and force the ego into defense patterns (visible in the flower-rejection episode). The rigid value system of the later adult can be understood teleologically as a creative counterreaction (compensation) to protect one's own identity from boundary transgressions. The family mockery (snapped cord) and the direct scapegoat role in conflicts presumably result in a lifelong determination to build a flawless system of argumentation in order to confront arbitrary authoritarian instances with superiority and to protect innocent third parties from systemic arbitrariness.

Sibling Dynamics and Birth Order

The subjectively experienced subordinate position in the family business reflects Adler's core propositions on the sibling constellation (Adler, 1933). Instead of viewing birth order as a static causal determinant, modern individual psychological reconstructions emphasize that birth order dynamics function as a subjective social experiential space (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). This aligns with contemporary meta-analytic and empirical findings showing that birth order significantly shapes cognitive styles, personality development, and adaptive divergent thinking patterns (Abdulla Alabbasi et al., 2021; Rohrer et al., 2015).

Clinical Differentiation: Obsessive-Compulsive Traits vs. Functional Compensation

In traditional psychiatric diagnostics utilizing modern classification systems such as ICD-11 and DSM-5, a rigid adherence to principles, pronounced perfectionism, and an omnipresent need for environmental control are typically categorized as anankastic or obsessive-compulsive personality traits (Gecaite-Stonciene et al., 2021; Bach et al., 2021). Individual Psychology, however, offers a crucial shift in perspective by focusing on the underlying functional and teleological meaning of these behavioral patterns (Carlson et al., 2006).

As outlined by Mosak and Maniaci (1999) as well as Millon et al. (2004), such rigid patterns do not necessarily represent a clinical lifestyle defect or a neurotic resignation. Instead, from a neo-Adlerian perspective (Watts, 2017), they function as highly constructive, structure-giving compensatory mechanisms designed to protect a vulnerable ego against early experiences of systemic arbitrariness and deep-seated childhood shame.

Relational Maturation and Emancipatory Transformation

The psychotherapeutic processing of early biographical trauma—characterized by severe relationship disruptions and parental anxiety induction—requires careful handling of defense patterns. While severe cumulative childhood trauma can impair structural mentalization capacities and nourish severe personality vulnerabilities (Fonagy & Bateman, 2008), the creative power of the individual remains capable of teleologically reshaping these vulnerabilities.

In the course of the clinical process, Thomas W.'s safeguarding tendencies underwent a profound functional modification. His rigid moral protective wall developed into an active, system-critical expression of social interest, thereby transforming past vulnerability into an emancipatory resource for representing structurally disadvantaged individuals (Rattner & Danzer, 2006). This development embodies the classic archetype of the "wounded healer" (Nouwen, 1979). Through the conscious confrontation and processing of his own early experiences of powerlessness, the patient succeeded in redirecting his striving for moral superiority into precise professional diligence and partisan advocacy. This illustrates how professional helpers can utilize their biographical wounds productively while remaining vigilant toward the dynamics of unconscious power projection in helping professions (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971).

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting these results. First, as a qualitative single-case study, the reconstructed patterns represent a unique biographical path and cannot be directly generalized to all individuals with principle-guided lifestyles. Second, the analysis relies on retrospective self-reflections, which capture subjective reconstructions of the past rather than objective historical facts. Finally, the qualitative analysis remains inherently interpretative, despite the use of peer debriefing to ensure objectivity; another Adlerian therapist or researcher might weigh the specific teleological functions of individual safeguarding tendencies differently or prioritize alternative coping mechanisms based on their clinical focus.

Conclusion

The present case suggests that Adlerian concepts can make an insightful contribution to the analysis of value genesis even in modern psychosocial contexts. Through the systematic reconstruction of the biographical material, it becomes clear that early experiences of powerlessness, cumulative organ inferiorities, and delegated shame do not inevitably lead to clinical rigidity or neurotic resignation. Rather, the data indicates that these burdens can be transformed by the creative power of the individual into a goal-directed, emancipatory life concept.

From an initially rigid defense against family arbitrariness, a highly developed, active social interest matures, which can be interpreted as a shaping, system-critical force. Justice thus becomes a dynamic lifestyle capable of converting past vulnerability into a deeply anchored resource for representing structurally disadvantaged people. The results thus suggest the hypothesis that social interest is not a passive virtue, but a profoundly transformative, shaping force.

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