

# Consequences of the Inferiority Feeling in the Human Personality Development

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**Abstract:** Included in the subject of activity of resonant names in the field of psychology, the aspects related to the inferiority complex could not have remained in the obscure area of psychological phenomena insufficiently explored by other generations of psychologists as well.

Here, we aim at presenting the major effects of this unwanted complex on the moulding of human personality. In our approach, we start from the variety of some possibilities in combining personality traits. We will continue by presenting the Freudian perspective, followed by the Adlerian one, on the discussed topic, and we will “get” nowadays, more precisely to the descriptive analysis, which is worth all our respect, made by Tiberiu Rudică, one of the representative personalities in psychology in Iași and in Romania, in general.

## **1. Human Individuality, the Essence of Allportian Thinking**

As the initiator of the theory of personality and the founder of humanist psychology, Gordon W. Allport himself states, the entire combination of factors, elements and influences determine people to be so different from one another and therefore to have equally different behaviors. Within his theory, Allport places the accent especially on the dynamic organization of personality, characterized by a continuous development and transformation, on the timelessness, diversity and multitude of reasons, on the conscious triggers of human behavior, on the individuality, unity, and uniqueness of each person. According to Allport, man is more than a meeting point of abstract dimensions; he is – before anything else – a unique creation of nature, a creation endowed with goals, which aims at integrity and completeness.

The holistic study of personality draws the attention from particular to general, from the concrete person to the abstract one and vice-versa. Allport stresses that what differentiates one human individual from another is their *individuality*, which represents the main particularity of man. In the Allportian view, man is an open system, which allows him to mould in interaction with his fellows and with the environment, because he not only takes from, but also gives to the ones he meets in contact with, and eventually

offers himself. A *healthy* personality characterized by an active position towards reality, by accessibility to facts, events, people and life, by self-knowledge, ability to theorize, individualize, by the functional autonomy of reasons, affective maturity and stabilization of frustration. Allport also points out the characteristics of a neurotic personality: passivity, alteration of truth, affective immaturity, and limited thinking.<sup>1</sup>

The emblem of uniqueness, which we all carry and which is the result of complex interrelations of factors, allows personality to be seen as a network of organization (whose structure includes a variety of cellular systems), a network modelled by heredity and environmental experiences that are never repeated, which actually makes it unique. Every one of us has a body, a physical structure made up of the same components that fulfil the same roles (walking, seeing, hearing, smelling, etc.), but we are extremely different in what concerns our psychological functioning. We are merely the result of the interference of a multitude of ever-changing factors that generate in their turn new changes, which result in different perceptions and respectively in different responses.

## 2. Sigmund Freud and the Psychoanalytical Approach to the Inferiority Complex

Sigmund Freud does not plead exclusively for organic inferiority as the source of the corresponding complex, as we will see his younger colleague did, but considers it more like the factor that triggers aggressive, abusive, excessive and monopolizing behaviours, aspirations towards power that characterize the human individual. Therefore, Freud believed that this symptom should be analyzed taking into account two aspects that he considers essential for this topic, respectively the castration of the child, or his loss of love (irrespective of whether these aspects are real or based solely on the child's imagination). Actually, the entire psychoanalytical thinking related to the analysis of the inferiority complex agrees with the general concept of *inferiority complex*; as a result, the problem can be viewed in terms of the human individual's want for power, although paradoxically (the same individual) also feels some sort of fear of the desired power. Not succeeding to quaint his thirst for power, man cannot experience the self-satisfaction determined by accomplishing an action, and caught in this entire hellish race towards acquiring power, he loses any sense of reality regarding his actual abilities, which he continuously overestimates, determining the very "raw material" that conditions the existence of the inferiority complex. In short, this is the psychoanalytical view on the dimensions of the inferiority complex.

## 3. The Inferiority Complex in the Adlerian Approach

The Austrian doctor and psychologist Alfred Adler have laid the bases of the concept on which the present paper builds. His work *Studies on the inferiority of organs* (1907) contains his first original ideas; the individual whose any organ is weakened tends to over-compensate for this flaw through a strong impulse of self-assertion. This impulse based on aggression, in its turn expressed as a "wish for power primary for the human."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in Adler's opinion, the complex we refer to comes from an organic inferiority, functional or morphological, and the affected person makes the efforts they consider necessary to compensate more or less for the "inconveniences" caused by the respective deficiency. To this mechanism, Adler attributes the dimension of causality of

<sup>1</sup> Allport, G.W. 1991. *The Structure and Development of Personality*, translated by Ioana Herseni, București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică. pp.15-21.

<sup>2</sup> Marco Drago and Andrea Boroli. 2006, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy and Human Sciences*, translated by Luminița Cosma et al.. București: All Educational Publishing House. p.27.

the entire pathological corpus, associating to it the effects specific to over-compensation.

In the opposite direction to the inferiority complex, Adler places the superiority complex, considered the over-compensation for the former; the human individual's aspiration to the status offered by power also determines the individuals to run away and isolate themselves when they feel the threat of a virtual failure, and the lack of courage replaces the initial impetus. The individual has to descend from the phantasmagorical, ideal heights towards which they let themselves propelled (sometimes by fake self-delusions), and this evolution of facts can lead to two diametrically opposed types of consequences: they will either persist in unfounded underestimations concerning their abilities, or will see that situation as "apocalyptic", which leads to impeding all future efforts. As we will show in this paper, although they are rare, there are nonetheless happy cases when the inferiority complex can become a source of mobilization for the individual, depending on their psychological structure.

#### **4. Forms of manifestation of the inferiority complex and its ways of "attack" on personality**

Starting from the descriptive perspective of the inferiority feeling, as it has been conceived by Alfred Adler, the author of the work *Maturizarea personalității (The Maturation of Personality)*, Tiberiu Rudică, refers to those who, for a variety of reasons – we will stop at some of them below – exaggerate in one of the following two directions: the former is the direction of excessive underestimation and the latter is that of the conscience of the superiority of another. Acting in the virtue of excessive underestimation results in the person withdrawing to their own aspersing feelings related to the limited psychological abilities the person believes they have. The second direction, that of the conscience of the superiority of another, "supplies" with the same generosity the state that Alfred Adler has called "inferiority complex". As we have shown, according to Adler, the semantic content of the mentioned phrase is the result - at least - unhappy of a comparison, a morbid symptom; for him, the aspiration towards self-achievement represents the nucleus around which the image of one's own value can be express. Here we refer to the entire series of feelings that characterize the human being during childhood, more precisely the period when they understand their impossibility to meet appropriately the requirements imposed on them by the social environment. From Adler we find out that "the inferiority complex dominates psychological life and allows itself to be clearly seized in the feeling of imperfection, of impossibility of fulfilment and in the permanent goals of man and mankind."<sup>3</sup> We must mention that this feeling of powerlessness that can develop into resignation (always with consequences for the young being) can be amplified by a precarious material state, by a physical flaw or by faulty education.

The famous psychologist of Iași mentions that there also is – fortunately – the possibility to overcome the inferiority complex through *the mechanism of compensation*; although this mechanism does not always prove useful, T. Rudică, quoting Vasile D. Zamfirescu, states, "When we act on the causes of inferiority, compensation is real and the inferiority complex dissolves. Nevertheless, there also are situations when, for subjective or objective reasons (socially *frustrating* conditions for example) we can only act upon the effect (the inferiority complex). Then we would deal with pseudo-compensation: the means are imaginary-subjective, not objective; the inferiority complex not dissolved, but sent to the unconscious. (V. Dem. Zamfirescu, *Între logica*

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Adler. 1995. *Sensul vieții*. București: IRI. p. 97.

*inimii și logica minții*, Bucharest, “Cartea Românească” Publishing House, 1986, p.42-43).<sup>4</sup>

But not only underestimation as a *personal attitude* leads to an inferiority complex, but also the negative estimation of those from whom we expect the opposite in evaluating our results; in other words, we can speak of also underestimation when we do not receive qualifiers at the level we consider we are entitled to. The mention “from those from whom we expect the opposite” refers to people dear to us, close to us, whose evaluations sensitize us deeply, as we do not consider that the underestimating attitude of our fellows *in general* could become a real source of the inferiority complex. This mention often concerns a malicious behaviour reflecting a wish to calumniate and disapprove adopted by “foreign” persons, a behaviour that – as we have already stated – does not manage to exploit the unhappy feeling. Certainly, our purpose is not at all to label as malicious *all* human individuals, as if this had been the general and compulsory feature of those who do not fit in our “frame” of sympathy and affection; we merely wish to signal that this feature exists, and sometimes in proportions that cannot be ignored.

There are also special situations when the feeling of inferiority can grow in the unwanted direction and become a “complex”, which means the endurance of an acute feeling of powerlessness that sometimes leads to the conviction that within the ego there exists a crushing, even tearing inability, and, by extrapolation, this powerlessness can develop an attitude of abandon, of renunciation. In the opposite direction and somewhat paradoxically, the feeling we discuss of can “work” productively, becoming a source of mobilization in the fight for surpassing this condition; we can try to acquire personal satisfaction in another field of activity. But, again, everything depends on the *psychological structure* of each person: “Am I able to overcome this obstacle that erodes my entire existence, that wastes all my energy, which otherwise I might use for satisfying purposes, or do I simply let myself go in this state, allowing it to dominate me for the rest of my life? Do I have the necessary resources? Am I able to use them?” This process is complex and lengthy, we cannot win the fight unless it is sustained, carried out with all our determination. Therefore, the results will not be obvious over night, on the contrary they will come in time; but once they appear, even if these results are few, they will stimulate the individual and *gradually* bring back their confidence and self-respect.

From a theoretical perspective, the author of the paper *Maturizarea personalității* refers to the existence of two categories of factors on which the inferiority complex based: the first category made up of *external conditions* and the author calls the second that of *internal conditions*.

In the previous phrase of *psychological structural* of the individual, we must consider elements such as indecision, hyper-emotionalism, acute depressive reactions, the degree of impressionability, the tendency towards isolation and exaggerated introversion, obsessive-phobic states, etc., which all represent a labile psychological fund of a person, favourable to the feeling of inferiority. When this fund completed by elements such as a faulty education, a family life characterized by extreme rules and interdictions, the aforementioned feeling can acquire dramatic dimensions. For instance, when a child with minor deficiencies such as light myopia, or who walks funny, or who has little hair, etc., is spoken obsessively of his small flaw (and not by foreign persons but unbelievably by the close family members, whose words the child actually takes into consideration and which truly affect him), the inferiority feeling finds fertile land! And when there are serious flaws (handicaps, disabilities), the already “trivial” former feeling of inferiority acquires deep roots in the consciousness of the poor being, so that they cannot free themselves from it and in time this leads to the Adlerian

<sup>4</sup> Tiberiu Rudică.1990. *Maturizarea personalității*, Iași: Junimea. p.38.

“inferiority complex”, an extreme form of the described feeling. Here too, in this context of an apparently irreversible moral collapse, there are a number of exceptions, which can become actual behavioural patterns. These are characterized by tenacity, ambition, the wish to compensate for the physical flaws: we refer here to the category of optimists, who despite their physical disabilities succeed due to their healthy spirit (in a way that we, “normal people” are almost unable to explain) in having an existence that offers them satisfaction and contentment. Again, it all depends on the psychological structure of every one of us, on the wealth or poverty of our resources, but for whose usage every human is responsible individually.

As G.W. Allport explains, when someone starts an action, they do so thinking about obtaining a certain result, but the influences from the environment, the other people with which they come in contact, can determine an internal disorganization, which leads to an imbalance that can negatively influence the expected result.

In the context we refer to, we cannot ignore that category of children whose vain parents cannot accept at all the idea that not all children *have to* be born with the attribute of genius, as it is not compulsory for their offspring to be endowed in all regards and at the extent, their parents expect. A child brought up in such a family atmosphere will experience almost without a doubt the effects of that feeling. We mean that atmosphere where he only finds lack of consideration, underestimation of everything he accomplishes and – ultimately – despise from the adults concerning his intellectual abilities, and where development is continuously inhibited by the attitude of the very people from whom the child expects the opposite of what we have above mentioned. Fear, perpetual torments in his concern with obtaining results that would meet the parents’ requirements – expectations often based on unjustified vanity – will definitely have the unwanted effect of the acute impregnation of the conscience of the innocent being with the devastating feeling of inferiority, which in many cases will have consequences throughout the existence of that person.

If we take into account the idea regarding the *internal conditions* of the acute feeling of inferiority and self-accusations, we can speak again – making the necessary changes – of the psychological peculiarities of each individual: “a) exaggerated repeated introspection; b) hyper-emotionalism; c) lack of self-confidence; d) lasting remembrance of one’s own unfavourable memories regarding oneself.”<sup>5</sup>

We could speak of two categories of introverts: one is that of the introverts who analyze themselves, even while performing an action (focusing their internal attention of the face mimics, gestures, eye expressiveness, different voice tones, etc.). All these contribute in keeping other people away, so that the introvert is praying to their internal torment created by an exaggerated introspection, or after the respective action is completed, when the person subjects their entire behaviour to a rigorous and unforgiving internal analysis, in the minute’s details. The positive component of such behaviour is that, based on an analytical intelligence with which introvert people endowed, they can reach, because of detailed analyses, to optimistic conclusions. These meant to give one back their self-confidence and trust that everything is fine, that if they adapted their behaviour in a certain direction things would go the way they want, etc.

The second category of introverts is that of people whose analytical intelligence does not diminish their intimidation, lack of self-confidence, but on the contrary amplifies these feelings. Such individuals concentrate too much on the *reason* of their intimidation, and emotionalism defeats intelligence. They get lost in their own problems of conscience. People characterized by high impressiveness so scared by the simple fact of imagining a dialog, that irrespective of the real situation they anxiously project a negative reaction from the virtual interlocutor.

<sup>5</sup> Tiberiu Rudică. *op.cit.* p.41.

In what concerns *hyper-emotionalism*, the author defines it as “that feeling that makes the individual intensely react to events and situations that seem insignificant for others: the strong emotion that dominates the hyper-sensitive person determines them to create negative representations, to imagine extremely serious sequels and dangers. Moreover, hyper-emotionalism can lead in some cases to intellectual blocks, to the impossibility to act appropriately in a specific circumstance. Psycho-pedagogical research has shown in this respect that, compared to an equally intelligent non-emotional individual, the emotional person stands no chance in a competition, because always, but especially in the context of an official contest or laboratory testing, the self control and lucidity of the non-emotional are superior to the lack of self-assurance and awkwardness specific to the emotional.”<sup>6</sup>

As it happens with all the elements included in the psychological structure of the individual, emotionalism too displayed differently from one person to another, according to their temperament. The significance of a moment with special connotations for the individual is equally important: in some persons, emotions are sovereign in their internal structure, and they act accordingly in crucial moments for their existence. There are also cases when a person can adopt an apocalyptic behaviour in situations that only require elementary self-control or a certain degree of concentration (for instance, standing for an exam).

*The lack of self-confidence* is the consequence of an erroneous self-evaluation compared to other people, which will generate, on the one hand, the certainty that it is practically impossible to obtain a success that others acquire, and on the other hand the fear to repeat the attempt. Those who permanently experience the acute feeling of lack of confidence in their own abilities become inappropriately stuck on their level of aspirations in their activity. The level of these aspirations lowers, as an effect of repeated failures, which are a sign of the insufficiency of that person’s ability to reach a desired level, and success, the expression of capacity, is the launching ramp for aspirations.

*The lasting remembrance of one’s own negative memories* results in a strong reaction of self-accusation. Someone who has a momentary failure and analyzes in detail each side of the respective context discovers subsidiary meanings, significations that reflect imaginary hostile intentions, which makes them give an unnatural dimension to the experienced failure, over-dramatizing everything and ending in severe self-accusation. The persistence of these persons in living their lives in the light of real or imaginary memories, to which they usually give a severe note, and the amplification of personal failures create in them a feeling of dissatisfaction for the past as well as lack of confidence, fear and discouragement regarding the future.

After this presentation of the causes of the feeling of inferiority, the author of the paper *Maturizarea personalității*, using his training as a fine analyst of *human psychology*, also suggests some solutions that may lead to “healing” (as the author himself calls it) or at least to diminishing this state called *acute feeling of inferiority*. Synthetically, these solutions are:

1. First, we must consider the *specificity* of the individual case encountered.
2. It recommended knowing exactly the *concrete circumstances* in which the person becomes discouraged.
3. We must create and meet a *warm affective climate*, an atmosphere of *security*, both within and outside the family.
4. When the subject is a child, their parents have to get them *used to unpredictable or difficult* situations.

<sup>6</sup> Tiberiu Rudică. *op.cit.*, p. 46.

5. The discouraged children must be encouraged by the parents to *give up constantly analyzing themselves* both while the action is in progress and after it is completed.
6. The people must get use to analyze lucidly the report between their own real abilities and the difficulty of the task undertaken at a certain moment.
7. Another factor refers to the *psychological and pedagogical tact* of parents and educators in the *group* where the respective timorous child or youngster lives and develops.
8. The most certain modality of obtaining self-confidence is without a doubt to *prevent* this state of mind.

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