

Adler and Binswanger: Individual Psychology and Existentialism

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Abstract

The author compares the theory and practice of the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler with the Existential Analysis of Ludwig Binswanger. Frequently overlooked aspects of the individual as a social being in Existentialism are discussed, as is Binswanger's awareness of the concept of style-of-life, inflexibility of lifestyle, anxiety as a social phenomenon, high-flown goals (as they relate to superiority striving), and private logic. The relation of teleological movement to the experience of time is also examined. The author concludes that both approaches are similar and that they complement each other.

Existential Psychology has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in recent years. A vigorous school in London, including Emmy van Deurzen-Smith (1997, 1998), Ernest Spinelli (1997), and Fred Strasser (1999), has contributed to this, and renewed focus on early workers in the field, such as Erwin Straus and Medard Boss, has arisen (Chessick, 1999). One of the foremost figures in the development of Existential Psychology was Ludwig Binswanger (Ghaemi, 2001), and I believe it to be useful to examine the similarities of his approach to that of Alfred Adler.

Dasein-Analysis

A Swiss psychiatrist, Binswanger became interested in the writings of Martin Heidegger, author of *Being and Time* (1990) and an acknowledged leader in the Existential movement. Binswanger corresponded with the philosopher and soon formed a close working relationship with him. Binswanger also had the rare privilege of being one of the few individuals with a differing theoretical outlook to have a lasting, amicable relationship with Sigmund Freud (Binswanger, 1966). Binswanger, along with Medard Boss, strove to apply Heidegger's philosophical ideas of existence to psychiatry and psychology, a project which resulted in "Existential (or Dasein) Analysis." Ghaemi (2001) wrote: "Binswanger tried to make Heidegger's ideas clinically relevant" (p. 52). As shall be seen, the ideas of Binswanger are also quite similar to those of Alfred Adler.

Following Heidegger, Binswanger wrote of "Being-in-the-world," emphasizing the importance of factors beyond the intrapsychic, yet not neglecting the "inner realm" either. As May and Yalom (1989) summarized it:

The human world is the structure of meaningful relationships in which a person exists and in the design of which, generally without realizing it, he or she participates. . . . From the point of view of existential psychotherapy, there are three modes of world. The first is *Umwelt*, meaning "world-around," the biological world, what is generally called the environment. The second is *Mitwelt*, literally the "with-world," the world of one's fellow human beings, one's community. The third is *Eigenwelt*, the "own-world," the relationship to one's self. (p. 366)

Thus, the implications of community for Existentialism is discerned, something not immediately evident in much of the early literature of that school of thought (Johnson, 1966). It can also be seen that Existentialism was a predecessor of the current biopsychosocial model, as Individual Psychology was (Peven & Shulman, 2002).

It is important to note that Binswanger did not accept Heidegger's writings literally, but rather usefully distorted and elaborated upon them in order to increase their clinical utility. As Hoeller (1986) stated: "Binswanger himself admitted later that his interpretation and use of Heidegger's enterprise for a new anthropology was based on a misunderstanding but, in fact, a 'productive,' misunderstanding . . . of Heidegger's *Daseinsanalytik*" (p. 13).

For example, Heidegger's concepts of *Dasein* and Being-in-the-World are vague, unusual, and apparently largely narcissistic or self-centered ones. Richardson (1988) stated: "Heidegger's question is not about man but about Being" (p. 178) and Lyons (1961), in his article comparing Heidegger and Adler, stated:

By means of [an] unexpected twist [Heidegger] is enabled to make use of the phenomenological method, just as though he were describing the world as it appears to human consciousness, yet to state the Analytic entirely on the ontological level because it is concerned with the meta-human "world" of *Dasein* [rather than actual, day-to-day existence]. (p. 152)

Lyons went on to explain that Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* has a fundamental structure of "ever-my-own-ness" where consideration for, or even awareness of, other beings is not a salient feature. Lyons also cited Erwin Straus's (1961) observation that in Heidegger's limited "world," children, animals, and nature exist solely to serve the interests of "civilized man." This aspect of Heidegger's thought apparently lent itself well to the doctrine of the Third Reich, which welcomed the philosopher and furthered his career (Morgan, 1996).

Lyons (1961) further noted that Ludwig Binswanger, being influenced by the more humanitarian potential of Heidegger's work, "was forced to reconstitute it, [committing] what may be termed an 'ontic error' – that is,

he treated Dasein as though it meant, not an exemplary and ineffable entity, but the actual existence of some particular human being" (p. 155).

As Lyons emphasized, what Heidegger did contribute was an elaborate vocabulary which enflamed the imaginations of those who would pioneer Existential Psychology (Anderson, 1965), such as Binswanger, Boss, and Sartre, especially as it was vague enough to lend itself to any interpretation, and, as Hoeller (1988) noted, Heidegger (who was interested in spreading the influence of his philosophical system) did not challenge any misinterpretations.

As Lyons (1961) noted, the importance of temporality, the significance of death, and concepts such as authenticity, becoming, and existential anxiety all arose from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. From these ideas, Existential Psychology would be born.

Being With Others

Although expressed in complex terms, Binswanger's interpretation of clinical phenomena was close in spirit to that of Individual Psychology. Writing of "Dasein" and "Being-in-the-World," Binswanger (1963) emphasized that existence always involves association with other people, and that any desire to be solely self-interested was merely an "extravagant wish." Binswanger (1958a) stated, "Being-in-the-world implies always being in the world with beings such as I, with coexistents" (p. 193). This, of course, is synonymous with the Adlerian view, which recognizes the human being as a social creature, placing an emphasis on the "Mitwelt." Adler, however, did not neglect the individuality of the person either, the "Eigenwelt" in Existential Psychology (Manaster, Cemalcilar, & Knill, 2003). Similarly, Binswanger (1963) wrote: "Man is as much a communal as he is an individual being; he navigates his life back and forth between them" (p. 177).

Binswanger (1963) was also aware of the psychopathology that could emerge from problems with reconciling individuality and community. Concerning one variant of this, he wrote:

What we call mental disease [may] come about when the self is no longer able to distinguish between "inside" and "outside," between existence and world. . . . In "delusions of persecution" [for example] these dams have burst. Existential anxiety floods the world of fellow men; the Dasein is threatened from everywhere, a prey to all. (p. 311)

Adler (1974) was also well aware of the cruelty of which human beings are capable, as his early work on the aggressive drive revealed. Adler, of course, did not remain at this view of humanity but offered social interest as a means to counter it. A similar development from alienation to solidarity or

mutual concern can also be seen in the work of many existential authors (Johnson, 1966; Rom, 1960).

Style of Life

Binswanger's (1964) exploration of the concept of Being-in-the-World led him naturally to that of style-of-life, and, somewhat surprisingly, he actually used this term when discussing the being-in-the-world of the individual afflicted with bipolar disorder, again revealing his affinity with Adler:

It is our task to discover the new principle by which this disorder may be understood. This principle, however, is no longer to be found [solely] within the verbal disclosure, the meaningful expression, or even thought itself, but only in the entire form of life, in the pervasively up-in-the-air, leaping, skipping life style of these patients, as you certainly have noticed. Where we speak of form of life and life style, we are speaking of the characteristic way in which a human being [is] in the world. And it is according to the how of their being in the world that the how of their selves, or as we mistakenly say, their "I," shapes itself. Self and world are not to be separated here, but are merely polar delimiting concepts within the one being-in-the-world. (p. 134)

Such a parallel might not be so surprising if it is recalled that Heinz Ansbacher (1959) once substituted the term "existence" in Adler's writings and the term "life" in existentialist writings, to show how Adler's concepts were, in fact, the same as the Existentialists'. (Note also how Binswanger stressed that "personality," which he viewed as something dynamic, arises as an interaction between self and world, just as Adler emphasized that human beings were inevitably social creatures.) This view, of course, also includes the uniqueness and "creativity" of the individual, which is an important tenet in both approaches, as the influence of the environment is considered an important, but not solely determining factor (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Van Dusen and Ansbacher (1960) have also stated,

Alfred Adler, founder of Individual Psychology, and Ludwig Binswanger, senior man in Europe's existential analysis, have come to nearly the same view of the major psychodynamics of schizophrenia. . . . Binswanger's position on schizophrenia not only parallels Adler's on schizophrenia but amounts to a recovery of Adler on all pathology. For Adler, as mentioned above, considered the schizophrenic only a more exaggerated example of what normals and neurotics do. (pp. 78–80)

Having an understanding of style-of-life, Binswanger then explored the pathological variations of it, which he encountered in his patients. Binswanger (1958a) stated: "The 'symptom' (e.g., of flight of ideas, of psychomotor inhibition, neologism, stereotypy) proves to be the expression of

a spreading change of the soul, a change of the total form of existence and the total style of life" (p. 213). This illustrates a parallel with Adler's belief that symptoms arise from a disturbance in the lifestyle (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Another aspect of psychopathology, similar to Adler's view, is found in the inflexibility of the lifestyle. Binswanger (1963) believed that what makes those suffering from severe and persistent mental illness seem alien or different to many of us is their "imprisonment in a world design" which is constructed of a few unchallengeable themes, that then transforms self into vulnerable and different, others into dangerous and poorly understood entities, and the world into a hostile and often terrifying place. Optimistically, however, Binswanger also noted, "The existence salvages whatever remainders of 'world,' and thus of the self, can be salvaged from existential anxiety" (p. 318), thus emphasizing the dependence of the individual on the world and on others. Like Adler, however, Binswanger was also cognizant of the element of a "retreat from life" (or the tasks of life) inherent in psychopathology. He wrote: "Even in anxiety there must be an 'of what.' As we have emphasized repeatedly, the 'of what' of anxiety is the Dasein [Being-in-the-World] itself" (p. 318). The parallel to Adler's model of anxiety as a social one (May, 1977; akin to Horney's [1937] "basic anxiety") is clear. Binswanger (1963) also believed that individuals could become trapped through their retreat from life, where they could no longer find a way in or out of existence and so endured a terrible agony of psychological paralysis. His famous case of Ellen West (Binswanger, 1958c) was presented as an example of this.

"Extravagance" and High-Flown Goals

Binswanger, like Adler, related the individual's experiencing difficulties with the tasks of life to a compensatory over-ambition. Binswanger (1963) wrote of the "Extravagant ideals" and "High-flown goals" which those with psychological disturbances develop as a desperate means to overcome their suffering.

Similarly, Binswanger (1958b) was also aware of the "all-or-nothing" of dichotomous thinking and the feeling of complete superiority or utter inferiority that is often seen in mental illness. Of one patient he stated, "Ilse's behavior was already being ruled by a particular set of alternatives—the alternatives of either power, victory, and deliverance, or defeat and powerlessness" (p. 231).

Of importance to Individual Psychology is Binswanger's (1963) observation that "Giving up the Extravagant ideal means the bottomless anxiety of succumbing to the other side of the alternative" (p. 255). This suggests that a cautiousness is required when challenging high-flown goals because

the abrupt unveiling of the underlying inferiority feeling may be too much for the individual to bear. However, these high-flown goals can also cripple the individual, which is notable from the Adlerian perspective as it represents a pathology of upward striving. Binswanger (1963) stated, "Human existence projects itself in breadth, and in height; it not only strides forth, but also mounts upward. In both respects, therefore, it is possible for human existence to go too far, to become Extravagant" (p. 342). Jacob Needleman (1963), the translator of Binswanger's papers, capitalized the term "Extravagant" to emphasize its emotional implications. In a footnote he stated: "To feel the full sense of the word, imagine a mountain climber trapped on a narrow ledge such that he can neither descend nor ascend, and from which he must be rescued by others" (p. 342).

Similarly, Shulman (1984) stated,

Binswanger is saying that the person who will become schizophrenic has created an impossible situation for himself . . . he has constructed a distorted and misguided goal which is impossible to achieve. He does not give himself permission to cease pursuit of this goal and believes that he will be a total failure if he does not achieve it. This notion that the schizophrenic has an inordinate and inappropriate goal is similar to that of Adler (1979; K. Adler, 1979)—a concretized, rigid and dogmatic aspiration to be in some way superhuman and a greater interest in this personal goal than in fellowship or enjoyment of life. (pp. 5–6)

Ellenberger (1970) stated,

Although Binswanger never quotes Adler . . . Binswanger's dual mode, plural mode, and singular mode of being-with-others are not very different from Adler's descriptions of community feeling, active striving for superiority, and retreating behind barricades. Binswanger's phenomenological descriptions of the vertical dimension seem to be a development of what Adler wrote on the dialectics of above and below. (pp. 641–642)

Additionally, Binswanger (1963) linked the emergence of Extravagance with the lack of love and friendship, noting that only those who had abandoned an interest in other human beings could fall prey to "high-flown goals." This is akin to Adler's (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) belief that certain individuals leave the "horizontal plane" of community feeling for the "vertical plane" of competitive power-striving.

Like Adler, Binswanger also stressed the importance of gradual effort at the tasks of life rather than escape into fantasy, relating the process of fantasizing to its effect on the interpersonal realm, as Adler (1945) did:

By "authentic" we refer to those heights (or depths) which can be attained only insofar as the Dasein undergoes the arduous process of choosing itself and growing into maturity. The disproportion evidenced in the manic pattern of life is spoken of daseins analytically as flightiness. It signifies the impossibility of obtaining a genuine foothold on the "ladder" of human problems and, in this respect, thus

also signifies the impossibility of authentic decision, action and maturation. Detached from loving *communio* and authentic *communicatio*, all too far and hastily driven forward and carried upward, the manic hovers in fraudulent heights in which he cannot take a stand or make a “self-sufficient” decision. Love and friendship have, in these airy heights, lost their power. Human intercourse is reduced to the level of psychiatric treatment (Binswanger, 1963, p. 347).

Death

Also important for an understanding of the similarities between Existentialism and Individual Psychology is Binswanger’s (1964) interpretation of “rising” as “life” and “falling” as “death”:

What we describe as manic-depressive disorder is merely a pathological formation and intensification of this universal principle of life and death, the entanglement of death in life and of life in death found everywhere. . . . Often enough melancholy looks through, like a dark background, the most unbridled arrogance of the manic phase. . . . You need only listen closely to the descriptions of nature by these persons, especially in the form of poems, you need only study their dreams or Rorschach protocols in order to realize that wherever you encounter the phenomena of mounting life—the blooming, flourishing, gleaming, resounding, the jubilantly soaring lark and the eagle lifting itself drunken with sun into the ether—you will never fail to find the phenomena of deciduous life—the withering, decaying, moribund, deformed or disorganized, the gray, gloomy, hateful, dirty, stinking, the worm crawling in the ground, the death’s head, the skeleton, the frigid mask or deformed visage, the discarded shards or scraps of paper lying around, etc. (p. 137)

Binswanger is therefore viewing “rising” (superiority striving) as a defense against “falling” (the ultimate defeat of death). There are broad parallels between inferiority feelings and death (Rom, 2003), and Adler also occasionally discussed the relationship between death and inferiority feelings, similarly noting how the fear of death could be used in a “neurotic arrangement.” For example, Adler (1979) stated,

A five year-old boy was slapped in the face by his aunt. Crying loudly, he exclaimed: “How can I continue living after you have humiliated me so?” In later years, he developed a melancholia in which death and suicide were continually on his mind. . . . Neurotics . . . in their overemotionality, whenever they believe they are confronted with a defeat which threatens their vanity, their prestige, they suffer such a severe shock that they feel it as death. Going one step further, they see in death (suicide or toying with a death wish) the only hope of avoiding an imminent loss of prestige. . . . The comprehension of the above problem opens a broad perspective. Actual death also means the end of the striving towards successful solution of the problems of life. (p. 242)

In Adler's example, failure is excused and concealed beneath a morbid preoccupation. In Binswanger's, I would argue, a feared defeat is symbolized through death and decay and is vigorously defended. Both show how inferiority feelings and a compensatory striving for superiority (even if only in an indirect, distorted form) can be discerned beneath thoughts of death.

Social Interest

Like Adler, Binswanger (1958c) made the useful clinical observation that anxiety can emerge and impede the movement toward social usefulness: "If once in a while she 'grasps at the faith' that her life does still make sense, that she can still be useful to others and help them, then fear comes and 'stifles this weak spark of life again'" (pp. 258–259). This statement would also imply that Binswanger felt, as Adler did, that social usefulness was important in the life and healthy functioning of the individual.

Also, like Adler, Binswanger promoted the importance of care and concern for others, which he termed "love." As Needleman (1963) wrote, Binswanger transformed (through a "creative misunderstanding") Heidegger's concept of "care" (which implied little more than self-care) into "love" (which involved care and concern for both self and others). Binswanger (1958a) himself stated,

I have to mention that my positive criticism of Heidegger's theory has led me to its extension: being-in-the-world as being of the existence for the sake of myself (designated by Heidegger as "care") has been juxtaposed with "being-beyond-the-world" as being of the existence for the sake of ourselves (designated by me as "love"). (p. 195)

This "for the sake of ourselves" is akin to the "fellow feeling" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) or "we-feeling" (Kunkel, 1984) found in Individual Psychology. As Johnson (1966) explained,

Heidegger, then, attempts to ignore the modes of existence which cannot be analyzed through the individual. Binswanger recognizes this omission and proceeds to correct it by emphasizing "being-with-others" and introducing the concept of "being-in-love" (Blauner, 1957). Kahn (1962) stated that Binswanger "felt chilly when he was faced with Heidegger's existential experience, with the cold nothingness and what not; hence he added love to the picture total." (Johnson, 1966, p. 37)

Private Logic

Binswanger also appeared to have an awareness of what Adler termed "private logic." Binswanger wrote,

Although there therefore exists something in which all might find something in common and communicable, namely, the Logos, yet the many live as though they were sanctioned in having their own understanding or their own private thoughts. (Foucault & Binswanger, 1986, p. 68)

Binswanger, like Adler, also observed how private logic could thrive in the dream and in delusional states, eloquently stating:

The individual's images, his feelings, his mood belong to him alone, he lives completely in his own world; and being completely alone means, psychologically speaking, dreaming—whether or not there is, at the time, a physiological state of sleep or awakens. (Foucault & Binswanger, p.69)

Teleological Movement and the Experience of Time

Also of extreme importance to Individual Psychology is the existential focus on time and how this relates to teleology. Binswanger (1963) valued time to such a degree that he stated: "Temporalization is not merely one existential phenomenon among others; it is existence" (p. 315). Morgan (1996), summarizing Heidegger's theory in his documentary film, stated,

Time and human existence are inextricably linked, according to Heidegger. Our being, he says, is really a process of becoming and this keen insight leads him to reject the idea that there is really a fixed human essence. . . . Existence for Heidegger is nothing but this "stretching"—whereby we are projecting ourselves into the future, always expecting, always hoping. Heidegger is a man who first wanted to investigate how practical action shows how we're pulled ahead of ourselves into purposes that we're trying to fulfill, into tasks we're working on. Think of a farmer in the Black Forest [Heidegger's home], for example, making a barrel. This is someone who has a future task that he's trying to fulfill and he has a logic operating there that shows that the human being is actually extended ahead of himself. The "ahead" is where we really live. What we desire to do, what we anticipate, what we want this wood to turn out to be.

The parallel between Adler's (as cited by Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) concept of the personality in motion toward a final, fictive goal (which is, of course, comprised of numerous short-term goals along a single "line of movement") and Heidegger's living in the "ahead" is quite close and readily apparent. In an article on Heidegger, Gendlin (1988) stated,

One is always already engaged, in the midst of trying something, striving for this or avoiding that, going about something. If we ask, "what are you doing?" it is never just the actual. We are trying to bring about this, or going to do that, or making this point or trying to achieve something that is not yet. (p. 58)

Binswanger (1963) wrote: "The purpose of [*Being and Time*] was the 'concrete' working out of the question as to the meaning of Being. Its preliminary

goal was to interpret time as the possible horizon of any understanding of Being" (p. 206). And further: "Existential height and breadth signify, ultimately, two different 'spatial' schemata of one temporal direction of finite human existence; they are, therefore, only conceptually separable" (p. 349).

This is a valuable merging of concepts because it defines one aspect of spatiality as "rising and falling" and defines time, experienced psychologically, as the movement toward the completion of a task or toward a goal—both concepts being quite synonymous with the Adlerian view; for Adler (1979) also viewed "becoming" as both a spatial (upward) and a temporal (teleological) phenomenon.

Conclusion

A close scrutinizing of Binswanger's writings reveals other clinical parallels between his work and Adler's, such as Binswanger's insight that compulsivity is an act devoid of meaning (other than, perhaps, the symbolic) and is thus a diversion from a true engagement with life (Binswanger, 1963). The Existential school has a valuable body of literature for the Adlerian to read because it offers a similar viewpoint that is broad enough to expand and enrich that of Individual Psychology. The two approaches truly complement and enhance each other, both becoming strengthened through the comparison.

Author's Note

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