



# Early Intervention in Special Education and Rehabilitation



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## COMPENSATION AND OVERCOMPENSATION IN THEORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATION

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### SUMMARY

*Compensation and overcompensation at children with disabilities is the topic that Vygotsky studied already at the beginning of last century. His observations he used to compare with observation that Adler made on the same topic. Both researchers found that mechanisms of compensation and overcompensation at children with disabilities are based on disharmony between personal imperfection and requests from their social surrounding. Children with visual impairment or hearing impairment, as well as people with motor impairments, always use mechanisms of compensation when they find themselves in situation that social surrounding has certain requests from them but their personal potentials are below these requests. Nevertheless, compensation is not always possible, and especially overcompensation is not always possible. The levels of compensation are different and dependant on the rest of capacities that certain person could activate as compensational. We believe that it is necessary to reactivate this topic in science and to interpret agitators and patterns of compensator mechanisms development in children with visual and hearing impairments and people with motor impairments. Rehabilitation and education of children with disabilities is not possible without knowing compensator mechanisms. Compensation is not always beneficiary and in certain situations compensation could establish psychopatological features.*

Key words: compensation, overcompensation, children with disabilities, special education and rehabilitation

### INTRODUCTION

In theory of special education and rehabilitation compensation and overcompensation are not central topics. One could say that this is because compensation and overcompensation are well known and accepted for long time. Compensation is psychological process that generate from disharmony between personal imperfections and requests from social surrounding. This disharmony could be consequence of congenital visual, hearing or motor impairments, as well as consequence of physical impairments, lesions or chronic diseases. In psychology, compensation is also called behavioural adaptation whose aim is to “give back certain imperfection or loss of personal feature” (English & English, 1958, p. 101). In this way compensation could be viewed as adaptation, overcoming of deficit and improvement of psychological functioning.

It is known from earlier practice that children with disabilities and invalid adult people show capability of compensation. Vygotsky (1996) was one of the first scholars that point to phenomenon of compensation in children with disabilities. At the same time Adler (1959, 1984, 2007) also made his observations about compensations and overcompensations that are result of diseases, physical lacking and weakness. Both of them pointed that misbalance between personal imperfections and requirements of social surroundings starts compensatory mechanisms.

We assume that that this topic should be reconsidered once again through analysis of observations and conclusions that these authors made.

### **1. Adler about compensation and overcompensation**

When Alfred Adler, Viennese psychiatrist together with eight of his followers and colleges left Freud's "meeting on Wednesday", that was attended by first followers of Psychoanalysis, one Wednesday in spring 1911, that was the time when Second Viennese School of Psychotherapy called Individual Psychology was born (the first one is Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis, and the third one is Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy).

Individual Psychology, as Adler called his theory, was founded on several postulates as inferiority complex, will to power, compensation etc. Soon, these terms became words used in daily conversation and non-professionals were using them in discussions, because they could anticipate their meaning (Adler, 1984).

The basic postulates of Adler's theory have their roots in his personal life experience. He was born in 1870 at the periphery of city of Vienne, in poor neighbourhood. From his early life he had to fight and struggle with difficulties. His childhood was labelled with several diseases like pneumonia and rickets, which kept him from walking until he was four years old. His physical constitution was weak, and he was short sighted. At that point, he decided to be a physician. Based on his personal early life experience Adler grounded keystones of his teaching about inferiority of physical body organs and surpassing them through compensation. He became best pupil in class, improved his physical strength, developed self-esteem, and neutralized feeling of inferiority that he had because of short high and social status (Sperber, 1972).

Adler began his medical career as an ophthalmologist, but soon switched to general practice, and established his office in a less affluent part of Vienna. His patients were mainly people from working class, and influenced him to start investigating social dimension of medicine. Later, that was the reason he joined socialist movement.

When Freud started to teach among his colleagues a new theory that he called "psychoanalysis" in year 1900, Adler joined him and became vigorous. He was active follower of Freud until they split in year 1911.

Actually, Adler was quite angry when someone would call him "Freud's follower". He considered himself as equal to his teacher. Often Adler would say that they "just temporally marched under the flag of psychoanalysis".

First meetings of Freud's study group did not show any signs, by remarks of members, that they have any wish to walk their independent way. Freud, which was without any doubt authority, made the boundaries between his followers was free to move. They had to accept keystones of theory of psychoanalysis. These were concepts

of libido, unconscious child's sexuality, and repression. Anyone that would jump out of this limited psychoanalytical domain was later punished by expulsion from the group.

Until year 1907, Adler did not show any sign of his independence. That was the year when he published his work titled "Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Psychical Compensation" in which one could assume his future path to independence. In next four years until his break, Adler formulated basic foundations of his teaching: about organ inferiority, about will to power that is expressed through compensation and overcompensation. In his later work he was discussing the meaning of life, life style, life tasks and social embeddedness (Bounouls, 1982).

The main reason to break with founder of psychoanalysis was concept of "will to power". Adler believed that centre of human psychology is not sexual instinct, but rather will to power. He assumed that sexual instinct is in service of will to power.

According to Adler, will to power is product of feeling of inferiority, that comes with birth. The child is the most helplessness mammal without any chance to survive without help of their parents or their substitution. Some pediatric psychiatrists believe that only children older than 10-12 years are capable to care about themselves. Helpless child that is absolutely dependent on parents develops complex of inferiority. The child understands that left alone does not have any chance to survive without food and protection (Adler, 2007). This especially concerns tribal society in which child learn from his early life point to survive in unpleasant surrounding. The act of initiation, in this community, define his maturity or capability to take care about himself.

In order to overcome long standing state of helplessness, the child develop strong motif – will to power. In formation of this basic concepts Adler used his medical professional and specially his life experience. He started life as rachitic and weak child, and bad student in school, but later became well developed young man and one of the best students in class. What he concluded from medical practice is that when one out of pair of organs is out of function (ie kidney, lung etc) than the other which is healthy overtakes the function in whole organism.

Motif that leads the child and later young person and adult, is pretension to neutralize that basic feeling of weakness. The weakness is product of not only physical, but also psychological and social milieu.

Freud once said that upbringing of a child is the most difficult task. Inadequate procedures of parents like scolding, disregards, humiliations, insults and physical punishments, leave trace in child's mind. Marks of these procedures are deep traced in immature brain and nerve system and acts through the rest of someone's life. Psychological trauma that occurred in early childhood is hard to neutralize. This trauma is ground stone for psychological feeling of inferiority. It is almost as some interior organ that is telling to a child "you are worthless, you mean nothing" (Adler, 2007). Feeling of inferiority that is based on insults could be source from which strong compensation force will develop as a wish for neutralization.

Together with two previously discussed types of inferiority socialization could synergistically influence formation of special life style. Feeling of social marginalization, rejection from community because of low social status, difference in race or ethnicity, belonging to socially discriminated groups makes strong experience of humiliation. This could lead to formation of grounding for later radical movements against inborn

status. Certain number of revolutionists, rebels and terrorists is recruited from this kind of milieu.

Social degradation is strong motor that moves some person that through compensation and overcompensation aims to social success, at first to lucrative goods and later to political power. Many biographers of state, political and military leaders, especially in last two centuries, point to the fact that some of these leaders experienced status of social degradation. Some of these people were from the margins of society, some from non-functional families (divorce, violence), or some of them were orphans.

Social degradation in these persons is usually followed by some physical body limitation like short height, body lesion etc that attracts attention and response of aggression, usually from class mates. Their insults might be that much strong that in some cases they lead to a suicide. In this way physical inferiority of certain organ leads to psychological feeling of inferiority. This person is subject of insult, laugh, verbal attacks (that are sometimes followed by physical attack) and it ends with social degradation. As a consequence of these three causes isolation, verbal boycott, and social ostracism develop. For Adler this feeling is at the end consequence of social isolation. The individual does not suffer much because of physical imperfection, as much for social marginalization.

### *1.1. Compensation and overcompensation – structural approach*

Inferiority that is present on physical, psychological or social level, or all three levels together, is hard to tolerate and provoke strong call for its cancellation. The individual starts strong battle with phenomenon of inferiority. He/she put the whole psychological apparatus in the service of compensation. All around us are persons that aspire to certain life aims, usually they collect material goods or they have aspiration to political power, in order to neutralize early childhood traumas. They try to neutralize feeling of lacking something like money or love. However, compensation itself may lead to social success and intimate satisfaction, if it is moderate and if life expectancies are realistic.

There are many people that surpassed their physical defect and succeed in the field that was related to their imperfection. Some of the best examples are Demosthenes and Helen Keller.

Sometimes it is quite difficult to draw the line between normal compensation and pathological compensation. (Adler, 1959). One approach might be in following. If someone makes realistic and rational effort to overcome imperfection, than we could define this as normal compensation. On the other hand if someone subordinates all efforts only in that direction, it is according to Adler definition overcompensation.

Sometimes aspiration for neutralization of imperfections became life style. Everything might be subordinated to this aim: professional career, marriage, upbringing and education of children. This aspiration for importance and power overcome all aims, and this type of hypercompensation has neurotic character (Bounouls, 1982). So according to Adler, neurosis is constant battle for fictive life style; similar to filling of Danaid barrels that according to Greek mythology are fathomless.

Individuals with hypercompensation are narcissoid, egocentrics and very offensive. They express quite often aggression toward society, they are occupied with themselves



and wit their own importance. Also, they try to dominate and they have superior attitude. During the conversation they are exclusive, but also very breakable if their opinion is not accepted (Slavik & Carlson, 2006). Their life aim is quite obvious; they aspire all the time to dominate and to be above the rest. If they have the opportunity they will collect needless stuff, to use them to neutralize basic insecurity.

With this kind of description of neurotic personality, Adler introduces social dimension (individual psychology). He is predecessor and founder of new direction in psychology that is named Neo-Freudianism. Neo-Freudians are also Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Carl Jung and others (Erić, 2008).

### *1.2. Community feeling– social aspect*

From his adolescence period Adler was acceptable for socialist ideas. When he married with Raissa Tomofejeva who was politically active in Russian Social-Democratic Party, Adler increased interest for ideas of socialism. That is one of the reasons he was better accepted than Freud among left wing psychologists.

Adler was among first psychiatrists at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century that pointed to social nature of neurotic conflict, which occurs not that much on intra but more on inter psychological level. Community feeling, helping others, generosity instead of egocentrism are boundaries that separates neurotic human from healthy person.

Community feeling, feeling for living with other people but not against them is what characterize average person. That is in confrontation with egocentric life aim that characterize neurotic person. The former aspire towards community, the later is neurotic and self-interested with own problems. Neurotic person is trying that through hypercompensation neutralize own feeling of lacking and inferiority that acquired in early childhood (Dixon & Backman, 1995).

Feeling of community starts early in family life. That is family which raises children to form warm relations between themselves, and later in their lives it will be manifested as a strong feeling for others. On the other hand, parents that raises children in cold surrounding that is often permeated with punishment and disregard create persons which will aim to power to eliminate feeling of infantile inferiority by any price.

## **2. Vygotsky about compensation**

In order to better understand the work of famous Russian-Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), social background of the time when his first capital book entitled "The Fundamental Problems of Defectology " should be enlighten. It was the year 1929 in new borne state of Soviet Union (Vigotski, 1996). The state was born through bloody civil war and communist revolution (1917-1920) which strongly affected ideology that was present in social sciences, but also in natural sciences.

Turnover in Soviet psychology also occurred. Before the revolution Freud had many followers in Russia (Wolf, Osipov, Sabina Spielrein), but new authorities criticized him as bourgeois psychologist. Freud was criticized that he founded his work on patients of Viennese middle and upper social class, but he never study social dimension of psychoanalysis. He was also criticized for concerning of neurotic conflict as intra



psychological, something that occurs only in personality, and that he did not care about inter psychological relations as confrontation between personality and society. Also, Freud was criticized for introducing biological determinism instead of social dimension. He claimed that faith of individual and neurosis are determined from biological background (Rieber & Carton, 1987).

After revolution new Soviet authorities stabilized state apparatus and state institutions as administration, police army, and turned to ideologization of whole society. They started aggressive action towards all “retrograde and bourgeois teachers“, especially in the field of philosophy, sociology and psychology. For the first ten years after the revolution these changes did not concerned the field of psychoanalysis. Vygotsky published “The Fundamental Problems of Defectology“ at the time when repressive state policy started to influence psychology. That is why his view about Adler’s theory of inferior organs and compensation should be considered from this perspective. On the other hand, Soviet psychology accepted from Western psychology and pedagogy some of the Adler’s work. Vygotsky also had much more positive opinion on Adler comparing to Freud.

Vygotsky finds in Adler’s work as a positive dialectic view. Vygotsky believe that inferiority or defect could be compensated to a new quality through dialectic. That is also a keystone of dialectic materialism (Rieber & Carton, 1987).

As Vygotsy says “Adler think in dialectic manner: development of individual is initiated by contradiction, defect, maladjustment, inferiority – and that is not only negative, imperfection, negativity, but also a stimulus for overcompensation. Adler makes basic psychological theory about dialectic transformation of organic inferiority through subjective feeling of inferiority to psychological aspiration towards compensation and overcompensation”.

Vygotsky points to teleological character of Adler’s teaching quoting that “we are not able to think, feel, act, if there is no certain aim...”. He also present that “Adler name defect as a initiating force of development through compensation and as a final aim of life plan...line defect-overcompensation is also leading line of child’s development in which some function is damaged or organ...defect alone is not psychological poverty, but also and source of power...”

Vygotsky finds Adler’s work progressive because of social dimension, relation between neurotic individual and fro him threatening bourgeois society. Vygotsky also believe that Adler’s teaching about genesis of neurotic defect must be discussed in much wider context: what is impact of whole society on development of defect? He shows that defect obtain full pathogenic power on mind after society accept that defect, and later through feedback that defect hits the child with physical body or mind defect (Rieber & Carton, 1987).

### **3. Criticism**

Starting from 1930’s work of Sigmund Freud was ideologically criticized in Soviet Union and labelled as “retrograde bourgeois teaching of Sigmund Freud”. Scientific research of Ivan Pavlov about conditioning reflex became obligate and general explanation for all psychological processes. Therefore, even Adler rejected psychoanalytical view his work was also criticized (Etkind, 1999).

The biggest disagreements between Soviet defectology and Adler were in the view of compensation and overcompensation. Adler believed that compensation is fashion that individual use to surpass his inferiority and to drive own psychological life to the status of normal.

Overcompensation is according to Adler, overthrow of aim, constant fight for fictive life aim, to which the whole personality is subordinate.

Individual psychology concerns overcompensation as pathological and find it at the background of neurosis and as well as psychosis. An individual overcompensates own feeling of inferiority with constant effort towards trauma that was obtained during childhood in order to neutralize that trauma. If that individual overthrow the aim, than that person gradually form the personality whose main life aim is to prove own qualities to itself and to the others. This way an egocentric and cynic person is formed. That person always wants to enlarge material goods. I that way "The Neurotic Personality of our Time" is formed as Karen Horney named her work (Hornaj, 1991).

Vygotsky believed that overcompensation as normal phenomenon is final act of process of compensation, and that process is not pathological. He supposed that overcompensation is onlu final point of one or two possible outcomes, one out of two poles of development that is influenced with defect. The other pole is unsuccessful compensation, running into disease, absolute psychological asociality. Unsuccessful compensation transforms itself through disease into defence, fictive aim that turns the life plan to wrong direction.

The terms compensation and overcompensations are seen in different ways. According to Adler overcompensation is pathological defence from inferiority, while Vygotsky consider overcompensation as higher form of successful compensation.

#### 4. Remarks

We believe that this topic deserves to be further reconsidered, but not only from the point of meta analysis but also from the point of scientific research. The reason for this reconsideration comes from the fact that this topic is not present enough in research papers that consider children with disabilities in special education and rehabilitation. Process of learning in children with disabilities and their inclusion in social surrounding, request knowledge about mechanisms of compensation. This might be of special interest knowing that compensation is not always beneficiary for an individual, but could also have some psychopatological features.

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