

Abstrak: Konsep *inferiority complex* telah banyak digunakan dalam psikologi kontemporer untuk memahami berbagai permasalahan psikologis, seperti depresi, kecemasan, dan gangguan kepribadian. Namun, penyelesaiannya selama ini cenderung bersifat sekuler, tidak mengintegrasikan dimensi spiritual dan terfokus pada salah satu pendekatan, seperti tabula rasa, hereditas, atau nativisme, sehingga kurang bersifat holistik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan mengislamisasi konsep *inferiority complex* yang dikemukakan oleh Alfred Adler dengan merujuk pada karya-karya Adler, sumber-sumber Islam terutama Al-Qur'an dan Hadis serta pemikiran para psikolog barat modern dan cendekiawan muslim. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi pustaka (*library research*). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun *inferiority complex* memiliki nilai penting dalam memahami psikologi manusia, konsep ini berakar pada paradigma barat yang sekuler dan cenderung menekankan otonomi manusia tanpa melibatkan ketergantungan kepada Tuhan. Melalui kerangka Islamisasi ilmu pengetahuan sebagaimana digagas oleh Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, konsep tersebut direkonstruksi melalui tiga tahap: *de-westernisasi* untuk membersihkan unsur-unsur sekuler; integrasi dengan menanamkan nilai-nilai Islam seperti tauhid, fitrah, muhasabah, tawakal, syukur, kanaah, dan ukhuwah Islamiyah, serta islamisasi yang menghasilkan rekonstruksi konseptual menyeluruh agar selaras dengan tawhidic worldview. Integrasi ini menghasilkan kerangka psikologi Islami yang lebih holistik dengan memadukan aspek psikologis, sosial, dan spiritual. Konsep *inferiority complex* dalam perspektif Islam tidak hanya berfungsi untuk menangani kesehatan mental, tetapi juga memperkuat iman, membina akhlak mulia, serta meneguhkan peran manusia sebagai khalifah Allah di bumi. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pengembangan psikologi Islami modern yang relevan bagi masyarakat muslim dan berorientasi pada kebahagiaan dunia sekaligus akhirat.

Kata-kata Kunci: Alfred Adler, Islamisasi, Inferiority Complex.

Introduction

One important theory in understanding the dynamics of human personality is the concept of the inferiority complex, developed by Alfred Adler, a prominent figure in the field of individual psychology. Adler defines the inferiority complex as a feeling of inadequacy experienced by an individual due to their inability to attain the standards or achieve the goals, they set for themselves (Adler 1917, 45). This feeling often motivates individuals to overcome their weaknesses and strive for excellence. However, if left unmanaged, it can lead to various psychological disorders (Adler 1917, 50). The concept has been widely applied in contemporary psychology to explain a range of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and personality disorders. Importantly, Adler emphasizes the role of compensation and continuous effort in overcoming feelings of inferiority as a vital part of the process of becoming a psychologically healthy and integrated individual.

It can be demonstrated that the concept was not only developed by Alfred Adler but also further elaborated within contemporary psychology. Albert Ellis, through *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy* (REBT), emphasized that feelings of inferiority often arise from irrational beliefs, which in recent research have been operationalized and measured through instruments

such as the *Irrational Beliefs Scale for Sports Officials* (IBSSO)(Carrington et al. 2025, 5) and the *Irrational Beliefs Scale for People Living with HIV* (IBS-PLHIV) (Xie et al. 2025, 6), both of which have shown strong validity and reliability across various applied contexts. Similarly, Aaron T. Beck's cognitive model highlights the role of negative automatic thoughts and maladaptive core beliefs in maintaining feelings of worthlessness, which has been empirically substantiated through the continued use of the *Beck Depression Inventory-II* (BDI-II), with cut-off points validated across diverse populations through recent meta-analyses (Wang et al. 2022, 50).

Meanwhile, within positive psychology, Martin Seligman's emphasis on character strengths and learned optimism has gained empirical support through the development of advanced instruments such as the *Character Strengths Test 24* (CST24), which has been shown to correlate strongly with improvements in psychological well-being and reductions in depressive symptoms. Thus, contemporary Western psychology, both theoretically and empirically, consistently underscores the significance of adaptive compensation as a primary strategy to overcome inferiority.

Thus, this concept has a strong foundation both theoretically and empirically, which can be explained as follows. Theoretically, Alfred Adler places inferiority at the core of personality development, where every individual from childhood carries a sense of deficiency that will shape the course of life, either developing into adaptive compensation or, conversely, into a maladaptive inferiority complex. Empirically, contemporary research demonstrates that inferiority is closely related to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and various personality disorders, and can be measured through modern instruments such as the *Irrational Beliefs Scale* (Xie et al. 2025, 6), the *Beck Depression Inventory-II* (BDI-II) (Wang et al. 2022, 49), and the *Character Strengths Test 24* (CST24).

The urgency of this study lies in the existing research gap, for although the concept of inferiority has been widely examined in Western psychology, integrative approaches incorporating Islamic perspectives remain limited. In fact, Islam provides spiritual resources such as gratitude (*shukr*), patience (*sabr*), and reliance on God (*tawakkul*), which may serve as healthy forms of compensation for feelings of inferiority (Badri 1979, 18). The choice of the inferiority complex over other psychological constructs is based on its more fundamental nature, since inferiority often underlies other psychological problems such as depression, stress, and anxiety. Moreover, this concept holds greater potential for integration with Islamic values and offers significant novelty in the Islamization of psychology, an area of scholarship that has seldom engaged deeply with the issue of inferiority.

However, to ensure that the concept of the inferiority complex is relevant and consistent with Islamic values, it must be re-examined through an Islamic perspective, given its origins in Western psychological

traditions. This calls for careful consideration, as Western psychology, including Adler's theory, is often viewed as secular and insufficiently attentive to the spiritual dimensions of the human being. In contrast, spirituality is a central and essential component of human life in Islam. This emphasis is clearly reflected in Islamic psychology, which does not rely solely on a single paradigm such as *tabula rasa*, heredity, or nativism but rather integrates these within a comprehensive spiritual framework known as *fiṭrah*: the innate human disposition inclined toward truth and recognition of God (Badri 1979, 30). As such, Islamic psychological thought is holistic, ensuring that spiritual aspects are not neglected.

Adler's theory of the inferiority complex suggests that individuals are driven to overcome their perceived weaknesses in pursuit of superiority (Adler 1930, 56). However, this idea stems from a secular worldview that emphasizes personal empowerment without anchoring human effort in reliance upon God. In Islam, feelings of inadequacy or weakness are part of human nature, yet they are not seen as flaws to be eliminated, but rather as opportunities to deepen the vertical relationship with Allah (Ghazali 2005, 34). Thus, the concept of the inferiority complex requires reinterpretation and adaptation to Islamic spiritual values to make it more relevant and effective in psychotherapeutic practices for Muslims (Rothman 2021, 78). In this regard, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas offers a valuable solution through his project of Islamizing contemporary knowledge. Al-Attas has also made significant contributions by developing a unique intellectual framework that synthesizes *kalam*, philosophy, and Sufism, thus illustrating the richness of Islamic intellectual tradition in contrast to Western secularism (Hidayatullah and Arif 2022, 415).

Accordingly, Adler's inferiority complex urgently needs to be re-evaluated through the lens of Islamization, especially since it concerns fundamental aspects of human experience such as the relationship with God, self-worth, and motivation.

Thus, it is essential to emphasize the importance of understanding inferiority itself. Adler stated that "*The feeling of inferiority arises in childhood out of the smallness and weakness of the child, and it never disappears entirely in the course of development. It is a permanent driving force of all human strivings*" (Adler 1927, 35). Inferiority emerges in childhood when the child becomes aware of physical limitations and dependence on others. This feeling never entirely disappears and becomes a permanent driving force of human striving; however, if it develops in an unhealthy manner, it may turn into an inferiority complex excessive, persistent, and impairing an individual's adaptive functioning (Li et al. 2023, 6). This view is also affirmed in Western psychology, which generally interprets inferiority as a form of human connectedness with the environment alone, without involving God in the course of life (Çimşir and Akdoğan 2024, 7).

Therefore, in light of such limitations, there is a need for deeper exploration of the concept of inferiority itself, in order to prevent its continued misinterpretation (Yang et al. 2023, 5). Inferiority should not be seen as a feeling exclusive to Western individuals but rather as a universal human experience, making it a concept of great importance that warrants further in-depth study.

However, this understanding differs from Islam, which possesses a distinctive perspective on human beings and their personality. In the Islamic worldview, human beings are regarded as noble creatures endowed with the capacity to attain moral and spiritual excellence (Daud 1998, 18). In this context, the Islamization of Alfred Adler's concept of the inferiority complex entails not only adapting the concept to Islamic values but also developing a new paradigm that integrates Islamic principles with modern psychological theory. This integration can offer a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the inferiority complex, one that encompasses not only psychological dimensions but also the spiritual aspects essential to human well-being.

In an effort to address this spiritual void, this study adopts the approach of the Islamization of knowledge as developed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. According to al-Attas, Islamization is a process of purifying and reorganizing knowledge so that it aligns with the Islamic worldview, which is fundamentally rooted in the concept of *tawhīd* (the Oneness of God) (Attas 1995, 13). However, before this process can be implemented, two essential preliminary steps must be undertaken: first, the identification and separation of key elements and concepts that underlie Western culture and civilization, particularly those embedded within modern secular Western psychology (Attas 1995, 114). Second, the infusion of fully Islamic elements and principles into these modern psychological concepts to reshape them in accordance with Islamic epistemology (Attas 1995, 118). And finally, the outcome to be achieved is Islamization, which constitutes the effort to restructure knowledge in accordance with the Islamic worldview centered on *tawhīd* (the oneness of God) (Attas 1995, 120).

Although the issue of the inferiority complex has received considerable attention from various academic disciplines, both in general psychology and within Islamic contexts, most existing studies remain fragmented and have not addressed the conceptual foundations of the Western theory underlying it. This is evident in a number of previous studies that have attempted to relate the concept to Islamic teachings through various approaches and perspectives. For instance, Shen et al., demonstrated that social exclusion increases feelings of inferiority among community youth, with rumination serving as a significant mediator (Shen, Li, and Li 2022, 9). This finding is reinforced by the clinical study of Warnock-Parkes et al., which showed that persistent negative self-evaluations, such as feeling

“unlikeable, boring, or inferior,” play a crucial role in maintaining social anxiety disorder (Warnock-Parkes et al. 2022, 5). Psychosocially, Akdoğan (2019) identified that feelings of inferiority are negatively associated with subjective happiness, with self-concealment and loneliness acting as mediators, thereby revealing the complex pathways between inferiority and psychological well-being (Malivoire et al. 2019, 58).

From the perspective of instrument development, Tümlü and Şimşek demonstrated the effectiveness of psychodrama groups in reducing feelings of inferiority among university students while introducing the *Inferiority Feeling Scale* (IFS) as a practical tool grounded in Adlerian psychology (Tümlü and Şimşek 2021, 1). Similarly, Haider et al. (2023) translated and adapted the *Inferiority Complex Scale* (ICS-10) in the cultural context of Pakistan, which proved to be valid and reliable, thus opening opportunities for further adaptation among Muslim populations in different regions (Sadiq 2023, 3).

In the context of Islamic interventions, a study conducted in Iran (2022) showed that Islamic-based logotherapy significantly reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among university students, with large effects measured through the BDI-II (Fereydouni and Forstmeier 2022, 140). In Malaysia, another study (2022) found that an Islamic-based intervention integrating religious practices such as *dhikr* and forgiveness significantly reduced depressive and anxiety symptoms compared to a control group (Saged et al. 2022, 80). From these diverse contributions, it becomes clear that there has been no specific, systematic, or in-depth research focused on The Islamization of Alfred Adler’s Concept of the Inferiority Complex: Integrating the Islamic Worldview into Modern Psychological Theory. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by offering an Islamization approach, an integrated and spiritually grounded alternative based on the principles of Islamic epistemology and spirituality.

This study aims to explore and Islamize Alfred Adler’s concept of the inferiority complex by referring to Islamic sources, particularly the Qur’an, Hadith, and the thoughts of Muslim scholars and intellectuals. The process of Islamization involves not only adapting Adler’s concept to Islamic values but also critically examining aspects that may conflict with Islamic teachings. Employing a qualitative methodology through a library research approach, this study will analyze the works of Alfred Adler and Western psychologists, especially those related to the inferiority complex, and examine their relevance to Islamic teachings. Thus, it is expected to produce a theoretical framework that is more aligned with the Islamic worldview while simultaneously contributing to the development of Islamic psychology.

Brief Biography of Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler (1870–1937) was a physician, psychiatrist, and the founder of Individual Psychology, born in Vienna into a middle-class Jewish family. His childhood was marked by severe illnesses that shaped his awareness of human frailty, later inspiring his notion of feelings. After graduating in medicine from the University of Vienna in 1895, he joined Sigmund Freud's discussion group but broke away in 1911, rejecting the centrality of the sexual libido in personality development. Instead, Adler emphasized that human beings are driven by the struggle to overcome feelings of inferiority and to pursue life goals, as he stated: "*We cannot think, feel, will, or act without the perception of some goal*" (Adler 1931, 11). He developed key concepts such as the inferiority complex, striving for superiority, birth order, and social interest, placing social and ethical dimensions at the core of personality development (Adler 1930, 30).

Although Adler came from a Jewish background, he was not religious in a ritualistic sense; nevertheless, he recognized the significant psychological function of religion. In his view, religious faith could serve as a form of "fictional finalism," providing meaning, direction, and hope in life, while helping individuals overcome inferiority by fostering a sense of universal connectedness (Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1956, 153). In the 1930s, he emigrated to the United States to teach before passing away suddenly in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1937. His intellectual legacy not only popularized the concept of the inferiority complex but also laid the foundation for humanistic psychology and positive psychology, highlighting the importance of integrating social, ethical, and spiritual dimensions into mental health (Hoffman 1994, 210).

The Concept of Inferiority Complex According to Alfred Adler

1. Definition of Inferiority Complex

As the founder of the school of Individual Psychology, Alfred Adler introduced the concept of the *inferiority complex* as a central element of his theory, serving as the starting point of all personality dynamics. He emphasized that from childhood every individual experiences feelings of inferiority as a consequence of physical limitations, which are universal and at the same time constitute the driving force of development (Adler 1930, 32). However, when not properly managed, these feelings may evolve into a pathological *inferiority complex* that weakens adaptive functioning (Adler 1927, 28). Within the broader framework of Individual Psychology, the *inferiority complex* is directly connected to other major concepts, namely *striving for superiority* and *fictional finalism*. It is the sense of inferiority that propels individuals toward *striving for superiority* and directs all behavior toward goals perceived as meaningful, for, as Adler stated, "*we cannot think, feel, will, or act without the perception*

of some goal” (Adler 1931, 12). The developmental trajectory becomes healthy only when it is grounded in *social interest* (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), the sense of connectedness and contribution to others (Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1956, 155). Thus, the *inferiority complex* is not merely a psychological construct, but the epistemological core underpinning Adler’s entire theoretical system.

Given these considerations, it is essential to first distinguish between *inferiority* and the *inferiority complex*, as this distinction is key to understanding personality dynamics. *Inferiority* is a universal experience that begins in childhood, arising from an awareness of personal limitations, and serves as a motivational force that drives growth, learning, and the pursuit of meaningful life goals (Adler 1917, 96). However, when not managed healthily, these feelings can develop into an *inferiority complex*, a chronic and maladaptive condition marked by persistent self-devaluation, distorted core beliefs, and excessive compensatory behaviors that manifest in social withdrawal, perfectionism, or narcissistic defenses, thereby increasing vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and personality disorders (Adler 1964, 54).

The difference between the two lies in their intensity, duration, and impact on adaptive functioning, with direct implications for assessment and intervention: situational inferiority may be addressed through support and skill-building, whereas the *inferiority complex* requires systematic therapeutic approaches such as Adlerian psychotherapy, *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy* (CBT), *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy* (REBT), or group-based interventions, supported by contemporary instruments such as the *Inferiority Feelings Scale* (IFS) and the *Inferiority Complex Scale* (ICS-10) (Yang et al. 2023, 10). Thus, clarifying this distinction is crucial for strengthening theory, guiding empirical research, and advancing culturally sensitive clinical practice (Kałużna-Wielobób, Strus, and Ciecuch 2020, 13).

The *inferiority complex* can be understood as a condition that is painful to the ego, in which individuals develop strong defense mechanisms to conceal their feelings of inadequacy both from themselves and from others. This condition often produces unhealthy emotions such as insecurity, anxiety, and even abnormal patterns of behavior (Cahyaningtyas et al. 2020, 5). Adler emphasized that “*the feeling of inferiority presses towards compensation and thereby results in a striving for superiority, for greater security, for perfection. This striving may lead to high achievement, but it may also give rise to neurosis if the sense of inferiority is too intense or compensation fails*” (Adler 1917, 97).

He further noted that “*all neurotic symptoms have their origin in an exaggerated sense of inferiority and in the striving for compensation*” (Adler 1927, 30), thereby situating the inferiority complex at the very core of psychopathology. At the same time, Adler highlighted its constructive

potential, stating that “from the moment a child begins to think, he is already seeking a goal through which he may compensate for his inferiority and feel a sense of superiority” (Adler 1930, 42), suggesting that feelings of inferiority, when managed healthily, can serve as the foundation for creativity, self-awareness, purposeful goal-setting, and the attainment of independence.

Alfred Adler emphasized that every individual is born with feelings of inferiority, stemming from physical and social limitations. These feelings are not merely obstacles but rather sources of energy that drive human development. To address this, he introduced the concept of *striving for superiority* as a universal motivation to overcome weakness, achieve excellence, and actualize one’s full potential. Importantly, Adler clarified that *superiority* is not about domination over others but a creative process of finding meaning in life, building competence, and contributing to society. In this sense, *striving for superiority* functions as a positive compensatory mechanism that transforms feelings of inferiority into energy for healthy and constructive achievement (Adler 1931, 25).

However, not all individuals are able to channel this striving adaptively. For those trapped in an *inferiority complex*, compensation often takes maladaptive forms such as arrogance, aggressiveness, perfectionism, or social withdrawal. These negative patterns worsen psychological conditions, leaving individuals caught in cycles of dissatisfaction and clinical symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and personality disorders. Contemporary research supports this view, showing that social exclusion has a significant effect on adolescents’ feelings of inferiority, with rumination serving as an important mediator (Shen, Li, and Li 2022, 10).

In practical application, Adler developed *Adlerian Therapy*, or therapy based on Individual Psychology, designed to help individuals understand, critique, and reshape their basic beliefs and fictional final goals (*fictional finalism*) that guide their life patterns. This therapeutic approach emphasizes the restructuring of lifestyle (*lifestyle analysis*) into healthier forms, using techniques such as the exploration of early memories, analysis of birth order, identification of hidden goals, and the consistent use of encouragement. Central to this process is the strengthening of *social interest* (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), which Adler regarded as a prerequisite for healthy personality development (Adler 1927, 38). Recent studies confirm the effectiveness of Adlerian Therapy, showing its benefits in enhancing resilience among adolescents, reducing social anxiety, and improving interpersonal relationships, thereby affirming its continuing relevance in contemporary psychology (Henriksen et al. 2019, 165).

Thus, *striving for superiority* and *Adlerian Therapy* represent two complementary pillars of Adler’s thought: theoretically, *striving for superiority* illustrates how inferiority can serve as the foundation of growth, while practically, *Adlerian Therapy* provides concrete tools for

transforming maladaptive compensation into healthier life strategies. Together, they reinforce Adler's conviction that feelings of inferiority are not weaknesses to be avoided but universal human realities that, when properly understood, can serve as the starting point for independence, self-actualization, and social contribution.

2. Compensatory Mechanisms for the Inferiority Complex

Compensation is a psychological mechanism essential for coping with life's challenges. According to Alfred Adler, all individuals experience feelings of inferiority from early childhood, arising from their dependence on adults and an awareness of their physical and psychological limitations. These feelings, when managed appropriately, can serve as powerful motivators for learning and personal growth. For example, a child who perceives themselves as physically weak might compensate by developing strengths in academics or the arts (Adler 1927, 89).

In Adler's theory of the inferiority complex, compensation refers to the individual's efforts to overcome feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem by cultivating specific abilities or achieving meaningful goals. When compensation is carried out healthily, it fosters resilience, ambition, and self-improvement. However, if these efforts are misdirected or poorly managed, they may result in psychological disturbances such as the inferiority complex, marked by persistent self-doubt, or the superiority complex, characterized by arrogance and overcompensation. In this context, understanding the balance between recognizing one's limitations and striving to overcome them is crucial. Properly managed, compensation becomes a dynamic force for personal development; mismanaged, it can contribute to emotional instability and distorted self-perception.

This view is also affirmed by several modern psychologists who recognize the importance of compensation as formulated by Adler, albeit within different theoretical frameworks. Abraham Maslow emphasized that compensation for human limitations serves as a driving force toward the fulfillment of higher-order needs in his hierarchy, aligning with the transition from deficiency needs to growth needs and ultimately self-actualization (Hoffman 2019, 46). Contemporary research further demonstrates that compensation for human limitations functions as motivational energy leading toward self-actualization through measurable constructs of personal growth (Souza et al. 2024, 10). Similarly, Carl Rogers highlighted compensation in the context of incongruence between self-concept and lived experience, where adaptive compensation is realized through unconditional positive regard, enabling individuals to reduce incongruence and restore personal integrity (Kirschenbaum 2019, 113). This has been empirically supported by studies demonstrating that unconditional positive regard facilitates adaptive compensation and enhances psychological adjustment (Hume 2022, 163).

Likewise, Viktor Frankl situated compensation at the existential level, asserting that suffering and inferiority can be transformed into positive strength through the pursuit of meaning, or the will to meaning (Batthyany 2016, 92). This is reinforced by recent meta-analyses confirming the effectiveness of existential therapies in reducing anxiety and enhancing optimism (Cox, Martinez, and Southam-Gerow 2019, 225). Thus, although framed within humanistic and existential paradigms, Maslow, Rogers, and Frankl collectively support Adler's view that compensation constitutes a central mechanism in fostering healthy personality development.

Although Adler's concept of compensation has been widely accepted in the field of psychology, it remains the subject of ongoing study and critique. Several prominent Western thinkers have expressed reservations about certain aspects of his theory. Carl Jung, for instance, argued that Adler neglected the collective and spiritual dimensions of human behavior by focusing too heavily on individual and social aspects. Jung emphasized that feelings of inferiority are not solely the result of personal experience, but are also shaped by the collective unconscious and archetypes embedded within human nature (Jung 1953, 45).

Similarly, Erich Fromm criticized Adler's theory for placing excessive emphasis on the individual's pursuit of success and social recognition, while downplaying the essential role of love and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Fromm believed that true compensation should not be limited to personal achievements, but should also involve the cultivation of healthy, empathetic connections with others, as these are fundamental to psychological well-being (Fromm 1947, 112).

Modern psychologists who reject Adler's concept of compensation include Albert Ellis, who argued that psychological maladaptation does not primarily stem from feelings of inferiority but rather from irrational beliefs that foster dysfunctional patterns of thought, thereby requiring cognitive restructuring rather than mere emotional compensation (Ellis 1994, 69). In a similar vein, Aaron T. Beck asserted that Adler's theory is insufficiently operational for empirical research, as depressive symptoms are more consistently explained by negative automatic thoughts and maladaptive core beliefs, which can be systematically measured through instruments such as the *Beck Depression Inventory* (BDI-II) (Beck 1976, 47). From the perspective of personality psychology, Hans J. Eysenck criticized the *inferiority complex* as overly speculative and lacking a robust quantitative foundation for scientific testing (Eysenck 1970, 102). Meanwhile, positive psychology, spearheaded by Martin Seligman, challenged Adler's focus as reductive, emphasizing weaknesses rather than strengths, while interventions based on character strengths and learned optimism are more effective in enhancing psychological well-being (Seligman 2011, 29). Therefore, while Adler's concept of compensation has made significant contributions to psychological theory, it has not

been universally accepted. Critics argue that it fails to account for the full range of human experience, particularly the spiritual, relational, and unconscious elements that shape human behavior.

In addition to critiques from Western psychology, there are also perspectives from Islamic thought, particularly those articulated by several prominent Muslim scholars. Malik Badri, for instance, emphasizes that in Islam, human beings are fundamentally weak and dependent on the help of Allah (SWT) (Badri 1979, 56). Consequently, healthy compensation should not rely solely on personal effort, but must be accompanied by *tawakkul* (trust and reliance on God) and a balanced pursuit of effort and faith. From this viewpoint, Adler's concept of compensation is seen as overly focused on human agency, while neglecting the spiritual dimension and the centrality of divine dependence in human life.

Furthermore, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas argues that the purpose of human existence in Islam transcends worldly success and is ultimately directed toward attaining spiritual well-being and the pleasure of Allah (Attas 1995, 78). Accordingly, a truly holistic approach to overcoming inferiority should not merely aim at restoring psychological balance or achieving social success, but should also serve to draw individuals closer to God and help them develop noble character (*akhlāq al-karīmah*). In this regard, Adler's theory is seen as materialistic and secular, insufficiently accounting for the spiritual goals and transcendent values that are essential in the Islamic worldview.

Despite its various shortcomings, Alfred Adler's concept of compensation continues to be widely utilized by modern psychologists in addressing the inferiority complex. This is largely due to its practical insights into how individuals can overcome feelings of inadequacy and strive toward the realization of their fullest potential. However, a significant limitation of the theory lies in its exclusive emphasis on human effort, while neglecting the role of divine guidance (Badri 1979, 56). From an Islamic perspective, healthy compensation must reflect a balanced integration of personal effort and reliance on Allah (*tawakkul*). Moreover, it should be directed not only toward achieving worldly goals but also toward attaining spiritual well-being and the pleasure of Allah (*riḍā Allāh*) (Attas 1995, 78). Therefore, by integrating Adler's psychological insights with Islamic principles, it becomes possible to formulate a more holistic and value-based theoretical framework, one that aligns with the Islamic worldview and contributes meaningfully to the development of Islamic psychology.

Islam teaches the importance of balance in facing weaknesses and life's challenges, which makes Alfred Adler's concept of compensation not entirely incompatible with Islamic teachings. There are notable parallels, particularly with the concept of *tazkiyah al-naḥs* (purification of the soul), which emphasizes that human weaknesses should be recognized and

overcome constructively, rather than concealed or suppressed in harmful ways. Islam acknowledges that human beings are inherently imperfect and that everyone possesses certain deficiencies. However, Islam encourages self-reflection (*muḥāsabah*), continuous self-improvement, and the pursuit of a meaningful life through sincere worship and devotion to Allah (Hoffman 1994, 95).

3. Steps Proposed by Alfred Adler for Addressing the Inferiority Complex

Adler proposes several steps to overcome the inferiority complex, including establishing a strong therapeutic relationship, conducting a lifestyle assessment, providing interpretation and insight, and implementing reorientation strategies. However, each of these steps has been subject to critique by various scholars who offer alternative perspectives on Adler's approach.

First, building a therapeutic relationship refers to the creation of a safe and supportive environment in which clients feel accepted and understood (Adler 1931, 30). This environment is essential for facilitating self-exploration and personal change, as it fosters mutual trust and empathy. However, Adler's approach tends to emphasize interpretation and insight as the foundation for this relationship, potentially overlooking the significance of unconditional positive regard in the therapeutic process. As Carl Rogers emphasized, clients require a genuinely non-judgmental atmosphere to explore their inner experiences freely and deeply (Rogers 1951, 98). In such a setting, they are more likely to engage in authentic self-discovery without fear of judgment or rejection. Nevertheless, this concept of the therapeutic relationship cannot be viewed as complete, as it lacks a spiritual dimension (Salam and Hussin 2025, 72). As Malik Badri noted, an ideal therapeutic relationship should include an awareness of God's presence, along with the importance of prayer (*du'ā'*) and trust (*tawakkul*) in the healing process (Badri 1979, 45). From an Islamic perspective, the therapist-client bond should be infused with spiritual consciousness rather than relying solely on secular, human-centered methods. Thus, while Adler's framework contributes valuable psychological insight, it remains limited in scope due to its secular orientation and insufficient attention to spiritual elements that are central in Islamic psychology (Ihsan et al. 2021, 105).

Second, Lifestyle Assessment. This step involves exploring an individual's lifestyle or habitual patterns of living, which serve as a mental map that governs how a person perceives and responds to the world. Lifestyle includes core beliefs, values, life goals, and coping strategies (Adler 1927, 173). In this stage, the aim is to identify specific patterns that hinder personal growth and development. According to Adler, feelings of inferiority are often rooted in maladaptive lifestyles formed

during childhood. However, this approach is not universally accepted. For instance, Aaron Beck emphasizes the importance of helping clients identify and change negative thought patterns independently, rather than relying heavily on the therapist's interpretations (Beck 1976, 89).

Beck argues that excessive dependence on interpretation can be problematic, as it may not always align with the client's unique lived experiences. This suggests a potential limitation in Adler's lifestyle assessment approach, particularly when addressing inferiority complexes. From a spiritual perspective, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas critiques this model for being overly materialistic. In Islam, a person's lifestyle should be shaped by spiritual values and oriented toward the ultimate goal of the afterlife, not merely focused on worldly success (Sulaiman 2023, 55). Al-Attas stresses that human purpose transcends material achievement and includes the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and the pleasure of God. Thus, Adler's focus on lifestyle lacks a spiritual dimension, making it insufficient for addressing the inferiority complex from a holistic Islamic worldview.

Third, Interpretation and Insight. In this stage, the therapist explains the psychological dynamics affecting the client, such as how feelings of inferiority influence behavior and relationships. Adler believed that gaining insight into the root causes of these feelings could empower individuals to make meaningful changes in their lives (Adler 1930, 79). The primary goal of this step is to help clients understand the underlying sources of their struggles, which can serve as motivation for positive transformation. However, this approach has also been challenged by figures in Western psychology. Viktor Frankl, for instance, argued that feelings of inferiority are often tied to existential crises that cannot be resolved merely through behavioral change or insight alone. According to Frankl, a deeper understanding of life's meaning is essential to overcoming such psychological struggles (Frankl 1959, 34).

He contends that Adler's approach focuses too heavily on goal achievement and success, while neglecting the individual's search for purpose and existential meaning. From a spiritual perspective, al-Ghazali offers a different view. He asserts that true insight can only be achieved through a deep understanding of Islamic teachings and a sincere relationship with Allah (Ghazālī 2005, 78). Adler's method, which relies predominantly on human reason as the source of interpretation, lacks the element of divine guidance (*wahy*) and spiritual reflection. Consequently, this step is seen as limited both spiritually and philosophically. Without incorporating revelation and a deeper metaphysical framework, the interpretation and insight process may fall short in fully addressing the inferiority complex (Hakim and Roini 2019, 63).

Fourth, Reorientation and Reeducation. This final step in Adlerian therapy emphasizes the importance of healthy compensation, whereby

clients learn to overcome feelings of inferiority without developing a superiority complex (Adler 1931, 45). It encourages the adoption of more adaptive attitudes and behaviors, as well as the setting of realistic and meaningful life goals. Through this process, individuals are expected to cultivate greater self-confidence, enhance social relationships, and lead more fulfilling lives. However, this approach is not without criticism. Existential psychotherapist Irvin D. Yalom argues that genuine transformation requires a profound understanding of human existence and one's relationship with the world (Yalom 1980, 56). He contends that Adler's emphasis on behavioral change overlooks the necessity of deep internal and spiritual transformation. In his view, therapy that merely targets outward behavior risks missing the existential dimensions of the human experience. From a spiritual perspective, scholars like Hamza Yusuf echo similar concerns. He stresses that true change must involve the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) and the cultivation of noble character (*akhlāq karīmah*), grounded in sincerity and closeness to God (Yusuf 2004, 34).

According to Yusuf, Adler's model places excessive emphasis on outward behavioral adjustments while neglecting the internal and spiritual dimensions that are essential for lasting and meaningful change. Thus, both from existential and Islamic spiritual viewpoints, there is a shared critique of Adler's Reorientation and Reeducation step: namely, its failure to incorporate deeper internal transformation and spiritual development, which are vital in addressing the inferiority complex holistically.

Thus, Alfred Adler's steps to overcoming the inferiority complex are generally in harmony with Islamic teachings, particularly in the areas of identifying problems, changing one's mindset, developing social interest, and setting meaningful life goals. Identifying the problem involves recognizing the root causes of one's feelings of inferiority and engaging in self-reflection. This process aligns closely with the Islamic practice of *muḥāsabah* (self-accountability), which is essential for spiritual growth.

Islamization of Alfred Adler's Concept of the Inferiority Complex

The process of de-Westernization within the framework of Islamizing Alfred Adler's concept of the *inferiority complex* constitutes a crucial first step to disentangle Western secular elements that are incompatible with the Islamic worldview. De-Westernization is carried out through a critical examination of the underlying assumptions and values of Adler's theory, thereby identifying the components that must be removed before the theory can be integrated with Islamic principles. In this context, the *inferiority complex* originates from a Western psychological tradition that emphasizes human autonomy and *self-power* without acknowledging the individual's dependence upon God (Adler 1930, 101). This separation

is necessary, since in Islam, the human being is understood as weak by nature and in constant need of divine assistance and guidance. Thus, Adler's emphasis on the self-sufficiency of human effort is considered a secular product that must be separated from the original concept.

Moreover, de-westernization is directed towards purifying the orientation of life inherent in Adler's notion of *striving for superiority*. Adler interprets the human drive to overcome inferiority as a striving for superiority, often understood in terms of worldly achievements, social status, and domination over others (Adler 1917, 120). Such an orientation is a legacy of Western materialistic and individualistic values. In Islam, however, life orientation is not merely worldly but is centered upon seeking God's pleasure (*riḍā Allāh*) and eternal happiness in the hereafter. Consequently, the notion of superiority rooted in Western cultural paradigms must be removed and reinterpreted in light of the Islamic concept of *ihsān*, the cultivation of virtue as a means of drawing nearer to God and fulfilling the role of humankind as *khalīfah* (vicegerent) on earth (Attas 1995, 116).

Another element targeted by de-westernization is Adler's therapeutic approach. Within the framework of Western psychology, therapeutic relationships are primarily built upon psychological interpretation and rational understanding, neglecting the spiritual dimension. In contrast, in Islam, therapeutic relations cannot be detached from the awareness of God, supplication (*du'ā*), and reliance upon Him (*tawakkul*). This critique resonates with Malik Badri's argument that secular therapies are reductive in nature, as they deny the spiritual dimension of the human being (Badri 1979, 16). Therefore, Adler's exclusive reliance on rational interpretation is separated as a secular element, thereby opening space for spirituality to be reintroduced into an Islamic psychological framework.

Similarly, Adler's *lifestyle assessment* is subjected to critical evaluation. Within the Western framework, lifestyle is often associated with worldly achievements, social status, and materialistic behavioral patterns. From an Islamic perspective, however, lifestyle must be directed toward spiritual values and eschatological goals. Thus, the materialistic orientation of lifestyle assessment is identified as an element to be removed. Likewise, Adler's interpretation and *insight*, which rely solely upon human reason while excluding revelation, are inadequate from an Islamic standpoint. In Islam, genuine *insight* is attained only through divine guidance via the Qur'an and the Sunnah, as well as through the purification of the soul, as emphasized by al-Ghazālī (Ghazali 2005, 20). Therefore, Adler's rationalist emphasis is set aside as a secular residue.

Finally, Adler's emphasis on *reorientation and reeducation* is also marked as a Western element to be removed. Within Adlerian therapy, external behavioral change constitutes the primary focus, while the inner purification of the heart receives insufficient attention. This stands

in contrast with Islam, which asserts that genuine transformation can only be realized through the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) and orientation toward eschatological goals (Yusuf 2004, 15). Hence, Adler's focus on external and material change is identified as secular and separated from the theory, so that it may be replaced with an orientation more comprehensive and consistent with Islamic teachings.

The outcome of the de-westernization process is a "neutralized" framework of the *inferiority complex*, one that preserves its empirical observations, such as the fact that feelings of inferiority emerge in early childhood and may serve as motivational forces for development, while removing its secular interpretations. Interpretations that exclude God, emphasize worldly aims, and neglect spirituality are stripped away. The result of de-Westernization is a concept freed from the influence of secular Western epistemology, prepared for the subsequent stage of integration with Islamic values such as *tawhīd*, *fiṭrah*, *muḥāsabah*, *tawakkul*, gratitude (*shukr*), Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*), and eschatological orientation (Waharjani, Jailani, and Huda 2024, 13).

After undergoing the process of de-westernization, which removes the secular elements embedded in Alfred Adler's concept of the *inferiority complex*, the next step is the integration of Islamic values into this framework. Integration is not merely a superficial insertion of religious terminology into Western theories, but rather the assimilation of Islamic principles to the extent that they form a coherent theoretical structure consistent with the Islamic worldview. Thus, feelings of inferiority are no longer perceived solely as weaknesses to be compensated by worldly achievements, but as part of the human *fiṭrah*, a reminder of humankind's dependence upon God. Adler indeed emphasized compensation as the primary mechanism through which individuals overcome inferiority (Adler 1917, 52), yet integration within Islam reorients this compensation towards higher ends: strengthening faith, cultivating noble character, and aligning the orientation of life with divine purpose.

The principle of *tawhīd* becomes the foundation of this integration. Islam affirms that God is the sole source of strength, while human beings are inherently weak and cannot rely entirely upon themselves. Through *tawhīd*, the drive to overcome inferiority is redirected away from the pursuit of worldly superiority and toward the quest for God's pleasure. This resonates with al-Attas's argument that all knowledge must be re-grounded in the tawhidic worldview, rather than being subjected to secular paradigms (Attas 1995, 118).

Next, the principle of *muḥāsabah*, or self-examination, is integrated as a replacement for the secular notion of *insight*, which relies exclusively upon human reason. In Islamic tradition, *muḥāsabah* serves as a means of recognizing one's limitations while cultivating spiritual awareness that all human deficiencies are part of God's divine plan. This is consistent

with al-Ghazālī's account, which identifies self-purification through *muḥāsabah* as the essential key to genuine self-improvement (Ghazali 2005, 26).

Thus, the stage of integration produces a new framework that unites psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. The empirical facts concerning feelings of inferiority are preserved, but their meaning is reinterpreted through Islamic values. Feelings of inadequacy are seen as opportunities for self-improvement through *tawhīd*, *muḥāsabah*, *tawakkul*, *shukr*, *qanā'ah*, and *ukhuwwah Islāmiyyah*. Integration renders the concept of the *inferiority complex* more relevant to Muslims, while providing a theoretical structure oriented not only to mental health but also to eschatological happiness and the attainment of God's pleasure.

The final stage in Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's framework of the Islamization of knowledge is Islamization. After secular elements have been removed through de-Westernization and Islamic values have been integrated into the framework, this stage involves a comprehensive conceptual reconstruction to fully align the concept with the Islamic worldview (tawhidic worldview) (Sutoyo 2022, 10). Islamization is not merely a matter of terminological adjustment; it is a paradigm shift that places God at the center and ultimate end of all human activity. In this way, the concept of the *inferiority complex*, which originally arose within the Western psychological tradition, is reconstructed into an Islamic psychological framework that is holistic, spiritual, and oriented toward the hereafter (Khakim 2024, 15)

First, Islamization reframes inferiority as part of the human *fiṭrah*. In Adler's perspective, inferiority is a psychological condition that emerges from feelings of weakness, incapacity, or defeat in comparison with others, which then motivates individuals to seek compensation through superiority (Adler 1931, 59). By contrast, within Islam, inferiority is understood at a deeper, existential level: human beings are created with inherent weakness to remind them of their need for, and dependence upon, God. The Qur'an states, "*Allah intends to lighten your burden, for humankind was created weak*" (Q.S. An-Nisā' [4]: 28). This understanding accords with Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah's view, which emphasizes that human weakness is a path to spiritual awareness and a means of strengthening one's relationship with God (Jawziyyah 2003, 77). Inferiority is thus not seen merely as an illness but as a divinely ordained mechanism that educates human beings to rely upon their Creator.

Second, Islamization redirects compensation away from worldly superiority toward spiritual refinement. Adler argued that healthy individuals are those who overcome inferiority through achievement, social status, or influence within society (Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1956, 133). In Islam, however, compensation is not channeled toward materialistic ambition but rather toward *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification

of the soul) and *ihsān* (excellence in worship and moral conduct for the sake of God). Al-Ghazālī explains that human beings will never find true satisfaction in the pursuit of worldly perfection, for genuine fulfillment can only be attained through a proper relationship with God (Ghazali 2005, 29). Accordingly, the compensation for inferiority is Islamized into a motivation for moral refinement, deeper worship, and nearness to God.

Third, Islamization enriches Adler’s notion of social interest with the Islamic concept of *ukhuwah Islāmiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood). Adler held that healthy individuals are those capable of contributing to society and demonstrating social concern (Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1956, 158).

Fourth, Islamization reconceives therapy for inferiority as an act of worship. In Western psychology, therapy primarily focuses on behavioral correction, mental health, and social functioning. Within the Islamic framework, therapy also encompasses the strengthening of faith, purification of the heart, and orientation toward the hereafter. Hamza Yusuf stresses that spiritual diseases of the heart, such as low self-esteem, envy, arrogance, or feelings of inadequacy, can only be cured through spiritual remedies involving remembrance of God (*dhikr*), prayer, and adherence to the Sharia (Yusuf 2004, 18). Thus, therapy for inferiority in Islam targets not only psychological healing but also spiritual well-being.

The outcome of Islamization is the formation of an Islamic psychological framework that is holistic, transcendental, and eschatologically oriented. The Islamized concept of the *inferiority complex* preserves its empirical observations, such as the emergence of inferiority in childhood and its motivational impact on development, yet its meaning and mode of healing are radically transformed. Inferiority is understood as *fiṭrah*, compensation is directed toward worship, social relations are framed within *ukhuwwah*, and therapy is conceived as worship that purifies the soul. As such, this concept becomes an Islamic psychological alternative that not only promotes mental health but also guides human beings toward spiritual perfection and eternal happiness in the hereafter.

Table 1. A comparative framework outlining the three stages of Islamization of Adler’s concept of the inferiority complex, de-Westernization, integration, and Islamization based on Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’s epistemological model.

Aspect	De-Westernization	Integration	Islamization
Main Focus	Removal of Western secular elements from Adler’s concept.	Incorporation of Islamic values into a neutral framework.	Comprehensive reconstruction within the tawhidic worldview.

C o r r e Content	Eliminating self-power (human autonomy without God).	Adding <i>tawhīd</i> (God as the center) Adding <i>fiṭrah</i> (humans as weak, dependent upon God).	Inferiority is understood as part of the <i>fiṭrah</i> that leads humans back to God.
	Eliminating worldly and materialistic orientation.	Adding <i>muḥāsabah</i> (spiritual self-examination).	C o m p e n s a t i o n directed toward <i>tazkiyah al-nafs</i> (purification of the soul) and <i>iḥsān</i> (spiritual excellence).
	Eliminating secular therapeutic relations.	Adding <i>tawakkul</i> (striving while relying on God).	
	Eliminating purely rational insight.		
	Eliminating external re-education.	Adding <i>shukr (gratitude) & qanā'ah (contentment as remedies for inferiority)</i> .	Social interest redefined as u k h u w w a h Islāmiyyah.
		Adding <i>ukhuwwah Islāmiyyah</i> (Islamic brotherhood and solidarity).	inferiority is conceived as worship and purification of the heart.
Outcome	The concept becomes 'neutral'; empirical facts are preserved while secular interpretations are removed.	Inferiority is viewed as part of the <i>fiṭrah</i> , drawing humans closer to God; the framework becomes holistic (psychological, social, spiritual).	An Islamic psychological framework that is holistic, transcendental, and eschatologically oriented.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the concept of the *inferiority complex* introduced by Alfred Adler is one of the most important theories in modern psychology for understanding feelings of inferiority and their impact on individual development. This theory emphasizes that feelings of inferiority can serve as a driving force for achieving excellence; however, if not managed properly, they may develop into psychological disorders that hinder personal potential. Despite its significant practical value, the concept is rooted in the Western psychological paradigm, which tends to be secular and provides insufficient space for the spiritual dimension.

Through the framework of the Islamization of knowledge as formulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the *inferiority complex* can be reconstructed to align with the tawhidic worldview. The Islamization process consists of three main stages: First, de-Westernization, which involves removing secular elements from Adler's theory such as human

autonomy without God, materialistic orientations, and reductive therapeutic approaches; second, *integration*, which entails embedding Islamic values such as *tawhīd*, *fiṭrah*, *muḥāsabah*, *tawakkul*, *shukr*, *qanā'ah*, and *ukhuwwah Islāmiyyah* to enrich the neutral framework produced by de-Westernization; and third, *Islamization*, which reconstructs the concept comprehensively by understanding inferiority as part of human *fiṭrah* that guides individuals back to God, transforming compensation into *tazkiyah al-nafs* and *iḥsān*, and situating therapy as an act of worship that purifies the soul.

This integration produces a more holistic conceptual framework that encompasses psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. Such an approach is highly relevant to Muslim communities, as it can be applied without causing conflicts of belief while simultaneously enriching the corpus of modern Islamic psychology. Furthermore, the synthesis between Adler's ideas and Islamic values creates space for the development of psychotherapeutic models that not only restore mental health but also strengthen faith, cultivate noble character, and enhance awareness of humanity's role as God's vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth.

This article makes a significant contribution to the Islamization of Alfred Adler's concept of the *inferiority complex* through the epistemological framework of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, although it remains largely conceptual and does not yet elaborate on its practical applications in depth. Future research is therefore recommended to empirically test the effectiveness of this framework in psychotherapeutic practice. Developing intervention models based on Islamic values, exploring their application across diverse Muslim cultural contexts, and integrating insights from contemporary *positive psychology* and neuroscience will be essential to strengthening the scientific foundation of this concept. In addition, drawing upon the intellectual heritage of classical Muslim scholars will be crucial for reinforcing its historical relevance and rooting it firmly within the Islamic scholarly tradition, thereby ensuring that the Islamization of the *inferiority complex* becomes a tangible contribution to the advancement of contemporary Islamic psychology.

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