

AN INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE ON IAN'S EFFORT TO OVERCOME INFERIORITY IN *ONWARD 2020*

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Abstract

Teenagers commonly experience feelings of inferiority as part of their growth and maturation. The film Onward portrayed this through its main character, Ian Lightfoot, who also struggled with such feelings. In this qualitative study, the discussion centers on the essential principles of Alfred Adler's individual psychology theory, namely fictional finalism, style of life, creative self, striving for superiority, and social interest. Additionally, this study explained various forms of compensation Ian demonstrated in dealing with his inferiority, including stubbornness, rebelliousness, disrespect, courage, a challenging attitude, confidence, and collaboration. Understanding these aspects is important to show how feelings of inferiority could positively contribute to psychological growth through appropriate compensatory mechanisms.

Kata Kunci: Teenagers, Inferiority feeling, Onward, Ian Lightfoot

1. INTRODUCTION

Humans are known for their complex emotions, reasoning, and ways of thinking. Their personalities and behaviors are shaped by diverse social and cultural backgrounds, which makes it difficult to understand human nature in literary works. Literature serves as an art of storytelling that not only highlights the beauty of language but also captures various aspects of human life. Characters in literary works often reveal psychological dimensions, including inner conflicts and social interactions. In line with Altun's view that literature reflects society (Altun, 2023), it is no surprise that social events are depicted in many literary forms such as prose, songs, fiction, drama, and films.

Moreover, various literary forms do not only depict social events generally, but also reveal how humans interact with their surroundings. Within such interactions, a variety of feelings and behaviors arise, influenced by social and psychological factors, including the feeling of inferiority. Alfred Adler explained that every individual experiences this feeling from birth due to physical weaknesses or perceived imperfections (Stoyanova and Ivantchev, 2025). Each person tries to overcome these feelings in different ways, depending on their goals and abilities (Adler, 1938). In the modern era, social media further intensifies feelings of inferiority, especially among adolescents who often compare themselves to the achievements and lifestyles of others (Rahmi et al, 2024). Therefore, Feelings of inadequacy frequently serve as a motivator for individuals to continue trying for success (Normaningtyas and Wulandari, 2016).

The portrayal of how inferiority feelings could motivate individuals to grow also appears in various literary works. One such example was *Onward* (2020), an animated film produced by Pixar and Disney, which narrates the tale of two adolescent elf siblings, Ian and Barley, embarking on a mystical quest to reunite with their late father. Throughout the journey, Ian often feels confused about himself and struggles to deal with unfamiliar situations. However, with Barley's support, Ian gradually overcame his doubts and progressed in attitude and actions. This journey illustrates that inferiority feelings, when properly addressed, could become a driving force for personal growth, in line with Alfred Adler's theory of Individual Psychology.

Moreover, Ian's experience in the *Onward* film demonstrated how feelings of inferiority transformed into a strong source of motivation. While many previous studies analyzed the *Onward* film through Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, others applied Adler's theory to different films, mainly highlighting the impact of compensation or striving for superiority. This study specifically applied Adler's individual psychology to *Onward* by analyzing its five principles and exploring how Ian compensated for his feelings of inferiority, particularly to assess whether his responses were positive or negative.

2. METHOD

To gain detailed insights, this study relied on a qualitative approach. This method, as described by Cath Sullivan and Michael A. Forrester, is used to understand social phenomena by exploring the meanings individuals give to their social context through descriptive data collection (SaThierbach et al. 2019). To carry out this method, the researcher watched the film *Onward* (2020) and read its script as the primary data source. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from various sources such as e-journals, e-

books, theses, and relevant articles. After that, the data collection process involved identifying and classifying relevant information from these sources. Furthermore, data analysis aims to present the findings clearly by using theory, in-depth narratives, comments, and direct quotations as supporting evidence.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This results and discussion section focuses on the feelings of inferiority that shape Ian's character development in the film *Onward* (2020). Feelings of inferiority, such as believing oneself to be less intelligent, weaker, or less worthy than others, are experienced by nearly everyone (Yang et al. 2023). Alfred Adler, a key figure in psychology, explained that such feelings begin in childhood and appear throughout various life stages. He viewed them not as weaknesses, but as a natural part of human development (Adler, 1927). In the film *Onward*, Ian experiences these feelings, and the way he responds is shaped by five principles of individual psychology, including fictional finalism, style of life, creative self, striving for superiority, and social interest. And shifting the focus to his personal efforts, Ian's ways of confronting inferiority in the film *Onward* (2020) take the form of stubbornness, rebelliousness, disrespect, courage, a challenging attitude, self-confidence, and collaboration, raising the question of whether these actions reflect positive or negative compensation

Fictional Finalism

The belief in a better future often motivates individuals to overcome feelings of inferiority. In individual psychology, this is known as fictional finalism, referring to an imagined goal that shapes a person's thoughts, behavior, and direction in life (Carlson and Englar-Carlson, 2024). Desires such as becoming successful, gaining recognition, or reaching the same level as others show how people respond to their limitations by focusing on what they hope to achieve. In Individual Psychology (Adler, 1927), this concept is explained as a mental process involving imagination, planning, organizing, and creating. Ian's experience in *Onward* clearly illustrates how fictional finalism guides personal actions and growth.

BARLEY

I don't believe this. (excited)

This spell brings him back. For one whole day, Dad will be back!

LAUREL

What?

IAN

Back?! Like back to life? That's not possible.

BARLEY

(holding up staff) It is with this.

IAN

I'm gonna meet Dad?

(Quoted from *Onward*).

In this scene, Ian's hope to meet his late father reflected the powerful role of fictional finalism in a person's life. For Ian, the idea of seeing his father, even for just one day, became a goal he truly believed would bring meaningful change to his life. This belief was not merely a wish but an emotional force that gave direction to his actions. Although

it seemed impossible, Ian began to trust that the meeting could happen, and this belief motivated him to try the spell. In individual psychology, this was an example of how an imagined goal, even if not entirely realistic, could shape the way a person thought, felt, and acted.

Style of Life

Beliefs about oneself and the surrounding world influence how individuals navigate life. In Individual Psychology, Adler explained that the style of life is shaped by early experiences, family influences, and a person's perspective on the world (Adler, 1927). Therefore, Ian's actions in *Onward* demonstrate this concept through his courage in facing difficulties, making independent choices, and taking initiative amid uncertainty.

GAXTON

You know, your dad was a great guy! So confident. When he came into a room, people noticed. (laughing at the memory) The man wore the ugliest purple socks, every single day.

IAN

(laugh) What? Why?

GAXTON

Hey, that's exactly what we asked. But he was just bold. I always wished I had a little bit of that in me.

(Quoted from *Onward*).

The conversation between Ian and Gaxton marked the beginning of a change in Ian's style of life. Through Gaxton's story, Ian learned that his father had been a confident and bold person, traits that differed from the way Ian had been living. This realization led Ian to start questioning his habits and attitudes. It became a turning point where he began to open himself to the possibility of living with greater confidence and courage, moving away from the patterns he had followed up to that moment.

Creative Self

Each person can direct their growth and make choices that reflect their individuality. Adler defined the creative self as an internal ability that enables a person to shape their development, guide their life toward the goal of perfection, and adapt to their environment (Henry T. Stein, 2011). This means individuals are not merely shaped by external forces, but take an active role in interpreting their experiences and determining how they live. In the film *Onward*, several moments show how Ian expressed his creative self through the decisions he made and the actions he took when facing various challenges.

Ian wipes dirt from the disk. They see the reflection of the raven's beak pointing back at the chest of the raven statue.

Ian goes to the statue, examines the chest, and pulls out a loose tile with a distinctive shape.

BARLEY

You see that, Dad? The apprentice has become the master.

(Quoted from *Onward*).

Ian showed that he was beginning to rely on his own thinking when he noticed the clue on the statue and acted on it. In that moment, he was not simply following Barley, but contributing through his own effort and observation. This reflected the role of the creative self, as he interpreted the situation in his own way and took initiative. His action revealed a sense of growing involvement, shaped by his willingness to engage and take part directly in solving the problem.

Striving for Superiority

Striving for superiority, as described by Adler, was the inner drive that encouraged individuals to grow, improve, and move toward their personal goals. It represented a lifelong process that shaped how people thought about themselves and approached challenges. Life was seen as a constant effort to overcome limitations and reach a higher sense of self (Adler 1997). In this process, rising above feelings of inferiority and aiming for self-improvement were essential. Ian's determination to go beyond what he believed

IAN

(trying harder) Aloft Elevar!

Nothing.

BARLEY

No, like - Aloft Elevar!

IAN

(angry, louder) Aloft Elevar!

(Quoted from *Onward*).

Ian's effort to cast the spell showed how determined he was to succeed. With each attempt, he put more focus and energy into his actions, trying to make it work. This moment revealed his desire to push beyond what he thought he could do. He was no longer just hoping for results, but actively working to achieve them. His determination reflected a striving for superiority, as he aimed to grow, improve, and prove to himself that he was capable of more than he had believed.

Social Interest

Caring for others and feeling connected to the people around us is something that develops over time. This sense of connection, which Adler called social interest, reflects a person's willingness to cooperate, support others, and take part in the life of a community. Besides that, Adler viewed social interest as an important sign of psychological well-being (Feist and Feist, 2009). In *Onward*, Ian's journey shows how this sense of care gradually becomes part of his actions and choices.

Barley smiles. Ian helps him up and they head out together.

IAN

So, how's the new van?

BARLEY

Oh, Guinevere the Second is great. I've almost got enough saved up for a sweet paint job.

(Quoted from *Onward*).

Ian's decision to surprise Barley with a personalized gift marked a meaningful change in how he related to others. He no longer focused solely on his own needs but paid attention to what mattered to Barley and acted in a thoughtful, supportive way. This moment reflected the core of social interest, as Ian showed genuine care for someone else's happiness and took action to contribute to it. His gesture demonstrated a growing sense of connection and responsibility,

Stubbornness

Individuals often displayed stubbornness not only in routine situations but also during critical moments that influenced growth. Although this stubbornness could demonstrate strong willpower, it sometimes complicated relationships and caused tension. Adler stated in *Individual Psychology* that stubbornness often emerges from the effort to claim superiority (Adler, 1927). Ian's behavior in *Onward* provides clear examples of this trait through his decisions and actions.

IAN

Barley, this is for a game.

BARLEY

Based on real life!

IAN

But, how do we know this tavern is still there?

(Quoted from *Onward*).

Ian's stubbornness became clear when he refused to accept Barley's plan. He insisted that the tavern Barley mentioned might no longer exist and dismissed the idea as part of a game. Ian's need for certainty led him to reject Barley's belief without giving it proper thought. This showed that Ian was not only cautious but also unwilling to explore unfamiliar possibilities. His stubborn attitude, in this case, became a barrier that held him back from trusting others and moving forward more openly.

Rebelliousness

Experiencing obstacles or feeling restricted in life often triggers rebellious attitudes as a way to seek freedom from pressure and limits. This response becomes stronger when individuals feel their environment fails to understand or support them. Adler explained in his book on *Individual Psychology* that such behavior was a reaction to feelings of being blocked or constrained (Adler, 1927). This understanding helps to clarify Ian's behavior in the film, where various scenes gradually reveal his rebellious nature and how it affects his relationships and decisions.

Ian keeps his eyes locked on the road, focused and frazzled.

IAN

I can't believe I'm running from the cops!

(Quoted from *Onward*).

Ian's decision to keep driving despite police presence demonstrated a clear act of rebellion. At that moment, he ignored the law and acted impulsively, driven by the

situation's urgency. While his actions showed determination, they also revealed a disregard for authority and the potential consequences. This rebellious act put him in danger and indicated that, under pressure, Ian was willing to ignore the rules to follow his own path.

Disrespect

Feelings of disrespect commonly surface when individuals find themselves at odds with others or sense that societal expectations fail to align with their own needs. Adler emphasized that such emotional responses are deeply connected to experiences of inequality. The pursuit of mutual respect and equal treatment between men and women is essential for creating balance in society. Without this, systems can become unstable, unjust, and suppressive to various groups (Thomas J. Sweeney, 2019). In *Onward*, this concept is evident when Ian reacts negatively toward Barley. Frustrated by the failure of his spell, Ian finds Barley's repeated talk about heart fire more irritating than helpful, leading to a dismissive response.

BARLEY

No, the expressway is too obvious, remember?! You can never take the--

IAN

If I hadn't listened to you! Okay? I can't believe this. You act like you know what you're doing, but you don't have a clue... and that's because you are a screw-up! And now you have screwed up my chance to have the one thing I never had!

Barley looks at Ian, hurt.

(Quoted from *Onward*).

Ian's words in this scene clearly showed a moment of disrespect toward Barley. Overwhelmed by frustration and disappointment, Ian lashed out and placed the blame entirely on Barley. Instead of expressing his feelings calmly, Ian attacked Barley's character, calling him a screw-up and dismissing all of Barley's efforts. This harsh response revealed not only Ian's emotional pain but also his failure, in that moment, to value Barley's intentions and support. His disrespect created distance between them and showed how easily frustration can damage trust in a close relationship.

Courage

Courage plays an important role when a person is faced with difficulty or uncertainty. It gives someone the strength to take risks and keep moving forward, even when the outcome is unknown. With courage, a person is more able to deal with problems rather than avoid them, and can find meaning in the steps they take. Without it, life often becomes filled with hesitation, low self-worth, and fear of failure. This understanding of courage reflects Adler's view that it is the foundation for living with purpose and direction (Mehrnaz Khoshgam et al. 2011). In line with this idea, several moments in the film *Onward* illustrate how Ian displays acts of courage.

Ian stands up straight and looks determined.

IAN

Well... well, I'm not!

BARLEY

Whoa, whoa, whoa!

The Manticore looks up, surprised. Barley looks at Ian, equally surprised.

IAN

You say you can't "risk" losing this place? Look at that Manticore!

Ian points to a heroic painting of the warrior Manticore.

IAN

She looks like she lived to take risks!

(Quoted from *Onward*).

Ian's response in this moment showed that he was beginning to act with real courage. Rather than staying quiet or waiting for someone else to take the lead, Ian stood up and spoke with purpose. He reminded the Manticore of who she used to be, pointing to her past as someone who took bold risks. By doing this, Ian showed that he was not only finding his own voice but also encouraging others to move forward. His decision to speak reflected an inner strength that had been growing throughout his journey. Ian's willingness to face uncertainty and take action, even when it felt uncomfortable, revealed how courage had started to guide the way he responded to the world around him.

Challenging Attitude

There are times when a person must stop relying on what feels comfortable and begin to take active steps toward change. Adler described this approach as a challenging attitude, where individuals face difficulties directly, make intentional choices, and aim for growth rather than passively accepting their situation (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). In *Onward*, Ian displayed this kind of attitude through moments when he stepped forward, acted with purpose, and took greater responsibility for shaping his path.

INT. LIGHTFOOT HOME - HALLWAY – NIGHT

Laurel sees a note taped to Ian's door: "Back soon with MINDBLOWING surprise!" along with a crude drawing of Laurel with a mushroom cloud blowing from the top of her head.

(Quoted from *Onward*).

The note left on Ian's door, promising a "**mindblowing surprise**," suggested that Ian had taken a bold step toward something unexpected. By leaving home with a clear intention to act, Ian no longer remained in a passive role. His decision to move forward and pursue a surprise plan reflected a challenging attitude. Rather than staying in familiar routines, Ian was now willing to face uncertainty and create new possibilities through action. This moment marked his readiness to go beyond what was safe and take steps that could lead to real change.

Confidence

There comes a point in a person's growth when they begin to trust themselves more and depend less on constant reassurance from others. Through experience, they start to see their own strengths and feel more capable of handling what life brings. This growing sense of belief in one's ability is what Adler described as self-confidence. In *Understanding Human Nature*, Adler emphasized that self-confidence plays an essential role in helping individuals face life's difficulties and continue moving forward with a steady sense of direction (Adler, 1927). This shift becomes visible in the conversation between Ian and Laurel, where Ian begins to show greater confidence in himself and the decisions he makes.

LAUREL

Wow, you must have been taught by some kind of sewing master.

IAN

Yeah, a very humble sewing master.

Ian finishes sewing. He holds out the thread and Laurel cuts it with the scissors. They've clearly done this a lot.

(Quoted from Onward).

Ian's brief and composed response in this moment reflected the positive side of self-confidence. He accepted the compliment with ease, without needing to exaggerate or downplay his ability. This quiet assurance suggested that Ian had begun to recognize his own progress and could carry out tasks calmly, without seeking approval. His reaction showed that self-confidence had started to support his actions steadily and naturally.

Collaboration

Collaboration often takes shape through simple experiences in the family, where people learn to share tasks, solve problems together, and support one another in daily life. These interactions gradually teach individuals how to cooperate and relate to others beyond the family circle. Adler believed that the ability to work well with others is shaped by how someone experienced cooperation in the family (Thomas J. Sweeney, 2019). This is reflected in the film *Onward*, where Ian and Barley support each other throughout their journey, showing how collaboration within a family can lead to meaningful progress and understanding.

The dragon sees the gem in Barley's hand and ROARS a terrifying, garbled version of the school bell.

IAN

Barley, RUN!

Barley jumps down from the fountain, grabs the staff, and takes off running. He calls out to the dragon.

BARLEY

What do you want?! The gem?! Fine. Take it!

He **THROWS** the gem as far as he can in the other direction. The dragon turns to chase the gem. But when it lands, we see it isn't the gem at all. It's Guinevere's turn signal. Barley and Ian race toward each other. Barley holds up his hand to reveal he still has the real gem.

(Quoted from Onward).

In this moment, Ian and Barley's success did not rely solely on quick thinking, but on the trust and coordination between them. Without needing lengthy discussion, they seemed to understand each other's moves and acted in harmony. Barley calmly created a distraction, while Ian supported the plan without hesitation. Their teamwork showed how much they relied on one another, and that sense of unity made their actions effective. This kind of collaboration highlights how facing difficulties becomes more manageable when shared and handled together.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Ian's transformation illustrates the deep psychological process of confronting feelings of inferiority. His journey from being doubtful and passive to becoming more active and confident shows how meaningful emotional experiences can

encourage personal growth. The analysis supports the relevance of five key principles from Alfred Adler's individual psychology: fictional finalism, style of life, creative self, striving for superiority, and social interest. Ian holds a fictional finalism, which refers to a life goal he imagines and believes gives meaning and direction. Motivated by this belief, he gradually reshapes his style of life to reflect a more purposeful and determined character. His consistent efforts to improve show his striving for superiority. His ability to make decisions based on personal reflection demonstrates the role of the creative self. Finally, his increased concern for others confirms the development of social interest.

Furthermore, the study highlights various actions taken by Ian in overcoming his feelings of inferiority. These actions include stubbornness, rebelliousness, disrespect, courage, a challenging attitude, self-confidence, and collaboration. These behaviors illustrate how Ian responds to his struggles, starting from less constructive ways and gradually shifting toward more positive and adaptive approaches. Overall, the findings emphasize that feelings of inferiority should not be rejected but rather serve as a strong motivation for personal growth. This study provides a valuable reference for those experiencing similar feelings to better understand themselves and find a path toward psychological growth and healthier social relationships.

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