

SOCIAL INTEREST — TASK AND CHALLENGE *

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Social Interest or *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* is the most important part of Adlerian theory, yet it is a concept that has been the most misunderstood by Adlerians. It has been reified; it has been confused with virtue, self-righteousness, praiseworthy personality traits and with masochism. It is rarely seen as an expression of a total personality which has matured, or stayed immature, within the context of physiological and socio-psychological processes. To disseminate a feeling of *Gemeinschaft*, it is not sufficient to tell others sanctimoniously that they lack it; rather, by example, we must illustrate that life lived in accord with it may prove to be more satisfying, more potentially open to new experiences leading to greater personal satisfactions. Specifically, as Adlerians we must take our place as one contributing group in the context of, and in association with, many other groups attempting to ameliorate our human existence within the context of our past, present and hopefully future society.

Commenting on the educational process, Lydia Sicher (1955) wrote that neither success nor knowledge should be seen as an end goal for education. The pursuers of knowledge are as fanatic as the pursuers of success. With sensitivity and clarity, she stated her personal conviction that *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* must become a leading philosophy in education to prevent society from its own destruction. That even societies carry the seeds of destructive and suicidal impulses was demonstrated by Alfred Farau's paper (1959), Joost Merloo's recent study (1962) and the tragic assassination of President Kennedy. Sicher defined social interest as human interdependence, a philosophy of life that perceived the social scene in horizontal rather than vertical relationships, lifting the person from the purely biological plane of self preservation and existentiality to the level of "essentiality." Alfred Adler defined *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* as an innate potentiality on whose development not only the wholesome development of each individual depends, but also the survival of society. It is seen as an emotionally positive attitude toward the human race, a feeling of belonging and wanting to belong, the feeling of connectedness with man as a universal relationship — the only successful way of overcoming Man's basic feeling of inferiority. For Alfred Adler, Social Interest was reality and deviation from it became irrationality and abnormality.

Any concept which assumes "innate potentialities" is difficult to verify empirically. I do not wish to imply that expressions of social interest are independent of physiological factors. On the contrary, that, which Adler called "organ inferiority", certainly plays a vital role. Let us examine the evolution of social interest in a developing organism. I agree with Allport (1955) who states that the infant is a socially dependent being but not even to the slightest degree a socialized being. Given at birth are certain

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characteristics of the human nervous system either inherited or having been modified in utero. A certain level of receptivity and reactivity is present at birth and determines the child's reaction to the world and in turn, the world's reaction to him. In later years, we designate this as a person's temperament. Some of us are oversensitive, easily hurt and react with uncontrolled fury; others of us are phlegmatic and appear to respond only to certain stimuli and not to others. Their responses are part responses, not holistic ones. Frequently, for example, we see more and more so called celiac babies; nobody has as yet determined whence comes their difficulty in retaining foods, but an overreactivity of the system may be pointed out here. This sensory-reactor system, the baby, encounters another more developed sensory-reactor system, the mother. Alfred Adler, and here all analysts of the various schools agree, has stressed frequently the importance of the mother in developing social feeling. If the mother does not respond realistically to the infant, she will impress her own sensory cues on the infant's world which the infant will internalize and make his own. An exaggerated example may be useful here. Should an infant's organism be endowed with such great reactivity that optimal environmental contact provides maximal excitation of the nervous system, a mother's profound need for physical contact might cause the child to veer away for self-preservation reasons. Indeed, one of my patient's earliest recollection is lying in the same bed with her mother and escaping her clutching arms by moving to the furthest corner, turning her back. It is of interest that the patient did not report any emotional associations to this recollection during treatment; a plausible reason for her reaction may be assumed to be physiological. On the other hand, a mother who lives an intellectual or fantasy life may not provide a child with that physical contact which is optimally necessary. What, if any, significance do such early encounters have on the development of social interest?

We can only speculate at this stage of our knowledge. Developmental psychology teaches us that infant development proceeds not only cephalocaudal, that is from head to toe, but also from gross undifferentiated body reactions to more defined and localized reactions. That is to say, in the beginning there is very little autonomy and control that the infant has over himself or his environment. The child is quite helpless and responds to physiological and environmental changes. Social and physiological reactions are still very much embedded in the same physical substratum. Spitz' studies (1946) of the ontogenesis of social relations demonstrate how interdependent child and environment are. For example, he concluded that if the emotional relationship between child and mother was seriously disturbed, the normal maturational response either fails to develop or shows abnormalities. Animal studies by Harlow (1962) substituted a mechanical monkey mother for a live one. In follow-up studies, Harlow had to conclude that the infant monkeys reared by the mechanical substitute all lacked social cooperation and developed as highly neurotic animals. This type of research is exceedingly important for it points to the fact that dispositions and their maturation depend upon the total concurrent state of the developmental situation. The handling of the organic needs which are also social by dint that another organism must react to them may very well condition the infant with a certain response readiness which is later on transposed into an

evaluative attitude toward the world. Thus, an important component of the style of life starts with the beginning of life. Coming back to Alfred Adler's hypothesis that social interest is an innate disposition, I should like to define it as a response readiness of the total organism which is undifferentiated at first and develops within the context of the total organism-environment situation. If the child is normally endowed, he will in time develop a hierarchical organization of traits which will be self-regulating and self-maintaining. It will ensure growth and orderly structure. One of the capacities most important for such individuation or a social style of life is self-awareness, self-criticalness and self-enhancement. Adler seemed to have this in mind when he stated that the first signs of social interest appear when organically determined impulses lead the child to seek the proximity of adults.

During the course of human development, such response readiness includes the capacity to delay impulse gratification, to direct oneself toward the future and to see oneself not as dependent but interdependent with other human beings. This is not an easy task for parents to achieve in educating the child. They must accept the infant's uniqueness as well as initial helplessness at the very start and train it to become more self aware till the final emotional separation from the parent. The mother, in particular, must be able to assess the needs of the child correctly, neither to pamper him nor to deprive him. She must not be overprotective and hysterical, nor must she expect that a child can be a little adult. All expectations and demands must be appropriate for a particular child and for a particular developmental level. Demands and expectations grow as the child grows. It is very easy for parents to fall into a trap. Those who are possessive and egocentric prolong infancy and arrest social interest by insisting that the world turns around the family—as in the middle ages the belief was that the sun turns around the earth. A. S. Neill (1960) who presented us with the same refreshing thoughts upon respecting children's rights went astray here. Though *Summerhill* purported to have trained children in self-reliance and self-worth, his stress on individualism completely overshadowed the possibility of cooperation within the framework of existing society. Again, a clinical example may illustrate the point. A patient of mine was brought up by parents who thought themselves very progressive. They imbued him with the feeling that the family represented a social elite and that others following a different life style were inferior and worse. His given right to see his private egocentric thoughts put into action with others caused him a great deal of anxiety and confusion. His inability to separate himself from his godlike parents served only further to create more distance between himself and others. He took refuge in magic and fantasy and sought to substitute these for social relations. His physiological reactions at an early age, according to his recollections, were also somewhat unexpected. He did not cry when he was badly hurt and in pain, and he did not remember feeling fear or anxiety in situations where this is to be expected from children. Is it possible that every social expression was inhibited already at an early age and substituted by fantasy and magic?

Alfred Adler believed that the style of life is determined by ages 4 to 5. Freud suggested that the basic character is already formed at 3 years of age. What is the evidence from the laboratory concerning the roots of the self

and the consistency of the style of life? Escalona (1959) accumulated developmental records concerning motor behavior and handling of motoric impulses of children. While the results were tentative, it seemed that this dimension served as a reliable predictor concerning future social development. Witkin has made it a life long study to understand the physiological correlates to perception, cognition and social attitudes. Although he gives little credit to Adler, lately (1962) he proposes to distinguish between two different styles of development in children that lead to two distinct and separate modes of ordering experiences: the structured analytic mode and the global, undifferentiated mode. He is convinced that internal frames of reference are responsible for self-definition, interpretation and reaction to the world, or as we know it, a style of life. He describes analytic children as guided by their own values, less dependent on authority but also less perceptive of subtle social cues. The global child is much more dependent on authority, less aware of the separation between his and other people's needs, but more responsive to social cues. Analytic children have a more mature body image than the global children and use it as an internal frame of orientation. Global children have a more undifferentiated body image and are unable to utilize it as an orientation. May I parenthetically mention here schizophrenic adolescents whom we have seen often in our offices. They perceive and react globally, are unaware of their bodies and lack orientation as to time and space. Analytic children see their parents as essentially supportive and are able to mediate their aggressive impulses by channelling them intellectually. Global children see their parents as essentially non-supportive. Witkin concludes that the mother's attitude, her underlying motivation, her warmth, her temperament and its compatibility with the child are all part of a psycho-physiological field to which the child has originally contributed its own endowment. These processes are reciprocal and result in subsequent adult development.

Tentative support to the theory that social interest is an expression of the total personality was given by my own research (1959). I was able to demonstrate that people, whom Witkin calls global and field dependent, unable to solve intellectual problem situations showed also an inflexibility in social attitudes. In the grown adult, his social interest is expressed not only in his bodily movements but also in the quality and mode of his verbal communications. In the first issue of the *Individual Psychologist*, Rosenthal (1963) discussed the relationship between verbal communication and biased, private thinking. Similarly, Helene Papanek (1963) examined the concept of mental health in relationship to social interest.

How does social interest enter the clinical experience in our offices from day to day? Opinions are divided here just as they are divided on the concept of social feeling in general. Alfred Adler (1930) stated that the therapist must lose all thought about his personal welfare and must never expect anything of the patient. Similarly, Lazarsfeld (1961) feels that the therapist must accept everyone without restrictions and conditions. Papanek attacks the superimposition of the therapist's values on the patient's values as brainwashing. However, she agrees that social feeling implies the ability to have lasting and close love relationships and live a life of usefulness and significance. How does the therapist convince the antisocial patient without trying to put more mature values in place of the arrested ones? Is it

social interest to accept every and all patients without conditions as Lazarsfeld proposes? Is it indeed social interest if we expect nothing from the patient and neglect our own personal welfare as Adler admonishes us to do? Farau's position is somewhere in between. He states that he does not always feel that the patient is his brother, but rather that both he and the patient are guests on this Earth.

I agree with Alfred Adler that we, as therapists, take over belatedly the parental functions and face the difficult task of reeducating the patient after his style of life has already been formed and solidified. However, just as parents must guide the child into constructive channels, we must guide the patient without being accused of brainwashing. Lasting and close love relationships can develop only as end results after the patient has been reeducated. If I do not challenge his style of life, he will not have much incentive to change. Remember that Adler warned us that social interest must be trained and developed. In my own experience as a clinician, I believe that the following parameters may be investigated to determine a patient's readiness for a cooperative endeavor, such as therapy essentially is: willingness to spend time and money, an expressed desire for help and the ability to accept help. Von Mehring (1962) suggested an interrelationship between disease, healing and problem solving. He stated that the patient's work method — his style of life — is a key issue in treatment. An understanding of the patient's mode to acquire and utilize information, and the consistency of his approach, may be a decisive factor in offering treatment to him. It is important that the patient express his desire for help and his willingness to make time and financial sacrifices to obtain such help. It is not unlike what Adler called the first appearance of social interest — the desire for the proximity of adults to obtain their help. Contrast this definition of social interest with the opinions mentioned earlier. If we are to be parental surrogates, we have the right to a contractual agreement with reasonable demands. We have the right to ask for money — since this is our livelihood — and that the prospective patient adjust himself to the time that is realistically available. And yet, there are people among us who consider such adult methods as “un-Adlerian”.

Another example may be cited here. A severely disturbed man was referred to me. He was not sure that he needed help and came because “people suggested it to him.” He was loath to look for a full time job and demanded that I take pity on him and see him for an impossibly low fee. He refused my suggestion to increase his earning power. I discussed with him fully his motivation and suggested that he may avail himself of the services of a low fee clinic. In my mind, I was convinced that he would not go unless he could obtain treatment on a no fee basis. He left, not offering to pay for the interview and since then has made no attempt to avail himself of low cost services. Finally, we can learn from the history of a very disturbed young man. He had been in treatment many times and went to clinics because he was unwilling to pay private fees. He broke treatment as often as he initiated it. He came back to see me privately in a dire emergency brought about by his asocial and amoral behavior. I set my fee and told him that I would only see him if he paid this amount. He agreed. The first check he gave me bounced. Thereafter, I instructed him to pay cash each time. Knowing his sickness, I also arranged with him that his father

would pay those times that he was unable to pay to afford uninterrupted treatment. I am happy to say that this approach worked therapeutically well. I assure you that lowering of the fee would have been most untherapeutic and caused him to feel that he could avail himself of people as objects without consequence. His favorite expression when he owed people money and felt no compunction to repay them was "if I have nothing, they get nothing — there is nothing they can do to me." Needless to say, he always managed to have nothing.

You may wonder by this time what point I wanted to make with respect to social interest in the therapeutic situation. I am not advocating that therapists should enrich themselves, and take no interest in the welfare of the patient and the community except for the money they make. Many of us are engaged in giving free hours to clinics in the community, teaching without recompense and carrying low cost patients in our practices. I wish to stress emphatically that social interest is not equivalent to putting your own interest in the background or that patients must be accepted when they request treatment at the time and under the other conditions that they set up. I wish to suggest that an expression of social interest is the trait of "reasonableness" and that you can have respect for yourself as well as for others. In our society, we live not by transcendental values alone. It is in accord with an expression of social interest that I get paid for the work I provide — in other words, we must beware not to equate social interest with exploitation. We must be on guard not to be overcome with our own sense of inferiority and to offer ourselves masochistically to be exploited in the name of social feeling. If we let this happen, there is no doubt in my mind that we shall, in turn, exploit others. Social interest means equality and respect, not martyrdom, idealization, self-abnegation and using this "goodness" as a virtue to demonstrate to others how they are lacking in social feeling. The close and lasting love relationships that Papanek mentioned can only come about if we have a chance to grow together with others, not below or above them.

Examining the confusion between social interest and self-abnegation leads us back to our clinical experiences. I am sure that a majority of patients fall into the two categories described by Witkin. Does the analytic type person or the global type person show more social interest than the other? I do not believe so. The analytic type is also the more withdrawn person who does not respond readily to social cues. The global person responds too much to them and becomes a "victim" of social forces. We see this constantly in our therapy groups. The person who constantly feels empathic with others does not show more social interest than the person who refuses to respond. It seems to me that the optimum of social interest is obtained when an individual can respond to somebody else in such a way that he feels sympathetic but does not encourage the other person in the unconstructive use of his feelings. In other words — he does not get lost and lose his identity. Such a state of response readiness presupposes that a person has enough Ego to enable him to have a balance between his own needs and that of society. Such a person does not give in to unreasonable demands but freely offers himself as a partner with equal rights and responsibilities in any undertaking. Such interdependence for the common good is here defined by me as a mutual benefit of the contracting parties

without either one gaining at the expense of the other. Of course, I know that such definition does not hold true completely in a vertical society. Here the common good must be redefined as respecting the role positions of the people I work with and insisting on respect in return. In case of conflict, it must either be mediated and if it cannot be resolved, the contract must be dissolved. But here again, I must stand with Adler and take the advantages as well as the disadvantages with good grace.

It behooves us now to examine the Adlerian movement as to how much an example we set regarding social interest. As many reform movements, Adlerians have many personal blind spots. As adherents of social interest, we often mistakenly assume to possess the TRUTH. Alfred Adler firmly stated that nobody possesses truth but that the meaning of reality is always unfinished and incomplete and never altogether right. The search for truth is a process and presupposes a humble attitude of being able to make mistakes. Adlerians still believe that our philosophies exist in a vacuum and are untouched by the evergrowing body of empirical knowledge; they abandon the search for common agreement based on empirical evidence, seeking to justify their own thoughts and philosophies. The world looks to the behavioral scientist for a remedy for international tensions. We social scientists are too concerned with arguments among ourselves and pay little heed to the world — we lack social interest. It is of particular grief to me that we are so prone to misinterpret Adler and use his concepts against other schools of thought instead of enriching them. We are, what Farau called “socially conscious,” but not always socially interested. I would like to suggest the following as a point of departure for what we Adlerians can do to train ourselves in social interest:

1. We should conquer our inferiority feeling and the need to compensate by accepting the contributions that other schools of thought have to make in our understanding of human development. We should actively cooperate with them and reach toward areas of understanding as well as differences. It is my deep conviction that if we are willing to look at observable phenomena we can get agreement on one level at least and that metapsychological theory on a higher level of construct building must wait for the laboratory to catch up and test the hypotheses.
2. We must be more aware of empirical evidence as reported in the literature. These reports may substantiate or invalidate theories dear to us. We are then faced with the choice of refining experimental techniques and await their outcome, or looking more critically at those of our tenets which cannot be supported. Above all, we must keep an open mind and allow our theories to grow and to develop instead of treasuring them without a chance of modifying them.
3. Adlerian concepts, because of their simplicity, can be easily defined operationally and put to a test. We must willingly support and initiate research that will shed light on our theories.
4. Finally, we must develop an ethic that demands that we surrender some of our sovereignty for the common good in order that we may more creatively use our powers within a matrix of interdependence. We must abandon a passive, defensive position and become more active.

I can see no more fitting conclusion than to quote a passage from Alfred Adler (1931):

“He (Man) will feel, ‘this world is my world. I must act and organize, not wait and expect.’ He will be wholly sure that the present time is only one time in the history of mankind, and that he belongs to the whole human process—past, present and future; but he will feel also that this is the time in which he can fulfil his creative tasks and make his own contribution to human development. It is true that there are evils and difficulties and prejudices and disaster in this world; but it is our own world and its advantages and disadvantages are our own. It is our world to work in and improve and we can hope that if anyone takes up his tasks in the right way he can do his part in improving it.” (p.262)

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