

Personal responsibility and modern life.

Adlerian Psychology emphasizes that a human being only can be understood in his social environment. This suggests that Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs would have been influenced by the developments of their time. As an illustration of this contextualization, we should note that Adler was a military officer in World War 1 and was confronted with considerable suffering. This experience strongly influenced the development of Adler's concept of social feeling (Gemeinschaftsgefühl).

"In the history of human culture, there is not a single form of life which was not conducted as social. Never has man appeared otherwise than in society." (Ansbacher 1964, p 128)

Four developments in modern life will be viewed from an Adlerian perspective.

1. Individual and Community

Adler considered each person as a social being. It reflects the core of human relationships. In his time - with a strong emphasis on the scientific and mechanical mind - he stressed the social component of psychology. He did not view the person and the community as a contradiction. The person and his fellows are dependent on each other. Adlerian principles also strongly emphasize human dignity and the associated personal responsibility. A person is a responsible, creative being who, within certain limits, chooses his or her responses.. The boundaries are given by heredity and environment (soft determinism).

2. Valuable Relationships

Adlerian psychology offers a great source for thinking about relationship. Working together is to the benefit of all. That implies that a relationship is not only understood in the light of personal benefit. The relationship is worthwhile because it has advantages for all, and it deals with what is needed in the given situation. What is in it for us! The person as an individual is of value, and social interest means interest in the interests of the other.

The key principle of this holistic view cannot be reconciled with a reduction of the person to an economic being. In human relationships it is extremely discouraging to see a person merely as an economic factor. Treating an individual in his or her own dignity and respect for who he is, contributes to a positive, valuable relationship. That is why investing in relationships is the basis of raising children, education, counseling, therapy and leadership.

3. Diversity

In "Social Equality: The challenge of today" (1971) Dreikurs provides a clear picture of what matters in living together as human beings. In essence it is about a democratic way of life based on social equality. Democracy is first and foremost seen as a way of living together and not as a system about a majority based on half plus one. It is primarily a way of life which strives for consensus and takes into account dissensus, and differences.

In a democratic process decisions need to be made for the benefit of all who participate. Individual and group welfare are equally important. The welfare of one person should not be sacrificed to the welfare of the other. The power of living together is not to erase or suppress differences, but to live with differences and respect them. One needs to see diversity as the normal standard.

4. Imperfections

In a man's striving to overcome difficulties – taking account of the welfare of others – he is not perfect. Educators and policymakers should not pretend that everything is totally "do-able." The art of life is to strive for "the good for all" (bonum commune) with acceptance of imperfections. Making mistakes is part of being human. An encouraging way of dealing with errors is to see them as resources, discovering what can be done differently next time. It is extremely discouraging for children and adults to live with too high standards throughout the day. If we believe something is good only if it is perfect, we would experience many disappointments every day. Demanding perfection, and being of the opinion that we can manage only by strict rules and tests, leads to great demotivation and stress, and ultimately giving up and not making any effort at all. Nobody can function each day living with requirements that cannot be met.

An encouraging attitude contributes to an “acceptance of yourself as you are.” We need to believe “you are good enough as you are.”

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