

Adlerian Theory – Brief Summary of Plenary Lecture at ICASSI in Wageningen, Netherlands

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Alfred Adler (1870 – 1937) lived during a time of major social change. He saw suffering while an officer in World War I and he helped build democracy in Vienna, Austria after the war. He saw that the life of an individual is shaped strongly by the society in which the person lives. A democratic society is needed for supporting the mental health of individuals.

Unlike Freud (1856 – 1939), who, as an older colleague, lived in more autocratic times and was not part of the social reforms of Adler's days, Adler focused on the social nature of human beings. Moreover, whereas Freud focused on inner conflicts and tensions as shaping human actions and emotions, Adler focused on the unified person moving towards goals. Inner conflicts were seen as a reflection of how the individual was moving towards outer reality. For Adler, the individual is a social being who, when feeling belonging, strives to contribute (Gemeinschaftsgefühl, or Social Interest).

The child's early social experiences shape the way the later adult interprets and moves towards life events. Social experiences can encourage or discourage the individual, and people need to learn how to encourage themselves. One way to do this is to separate the 'deed from the doer,' as Dreikurs wrote in *Encouraging Children to Learn*. In *Social Equality*, Dreikurs described that the way to have good mental health is to function on the horizontal plane, by being committed to social equality and not wanting to be superior to others nor feeling inferior to others.

To help a discouraged individual change, one needs to know how to encourage the person and to help the person understand mistaken goals. Wanting to be 'special' is a mistaken goal. Some people learn to 'be good' but their goal is to be special and not to contribute. We can learn to recognize our mistaken goals and to create new goals that are based on social equality.