

Current Role Confusion Among Young Women from The Viewpoint of Adler's Psychology*

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Hall and Lindzey, authors of the well-known compilation of personality theories, believe that Alfred Adler's "greatest contribution to psychological theory" (Hall & Lindzey, 1957) was his emphasis on social determinants of behavior. Current theories take it for granted that cultural values influence the self-image and expectancies of the individual. Yet, at one time it was assumed that gender role behavior was genetic and fixed. Adler was one of the first to dispute this view. As early as 1910 (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967) he used the term "masculine protest" to describe patterns of behavior which expressed women's objections to the subservient role they were asked to assume in society. Adler's theory of human relations postulates that any individual believing himself in an inferior social position will, by any method available, try to overcome the subjectively perceived disadvantage. Furthermore, Adler recognized the prevailing patriarchal nature of society which led both men and women to consider the female inferior and of lesser value than the male. This inequality

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produced a constant tension between men and women. In order to resolve conflicts resulting from relationships between unequal groups; e.g. men/women, White/Black, parents/children, society would have to strive to perfect democracy. For Adler, democracy meant assigning equal worth to all humans (gleichwertigkeit) and required the development of Social Interest (Adler, 1970) (Gemeinschaftsgefühl), the striving toward the overcoming of societal difficulties rather than narrow self-centered goals of gaining power over others.

Following Adler's statement that social climate determines gender role behavior (Adler, 1954; Dreikurs, 1953) feminist literature in the past few decades has brought sharply into focus the fact that we are experiencing a transitional phase in society's definition of the feminine gender role (DeBeauvoir, 1961; Friedan, 1963; Millet, 1970; Bem, 1975). As a consequence, many young women have unclear and contradictory gender role expectations.

Clinical practice offers evidence of this confusion. During this last year there were ten women who came to us for psychotherapy with a chief complaint of depression. In addition to depression they complained they had not found satisfaction in the pursuit of a career, and/or had not established a "meaningful relationship" with a man. The underlying psychological factors in all cases seemed to be a confusion and dissatisfaction with gender role. Social values had led to unclear and contradictory expectations.

In spite of the well-known limits to inductive reasoning, clinical inference and other indirect methods can be exceedingly useful. With due regard to the limitations of this method, the following conclusions are offered to help explain the phenomenon of women dissatisfied both in career pursuits and heterosexual relationships.

The women discussed in this paper were all between the ages of 24 and 31, attractive, and of middle-class socioeconomic background. All except one had graduated from college and several had Master's degrees. They were all sexually experienced (a few reported periods of promiscuity), date periodically, and felt comparatively comfortable with their sexuality. All but one was living away from her parents.

In order to examine the psychological determinants of behavior each client was asked to undergo a Life-Style analysis. This procedure has been described by Dreikurs, Shulman and others* (Adler, 1964; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967; Dreikurs, 1967; Shulman, 1962,

*The reader is asked to remember that "life-style" is a technical term to Adlerians. A life-style analysis does not yield a formal DSM II clinical diagnosis but does reveal psychodynamics.

1973). Certain psychodynamic material (self-image, expectations, values, and gender role definitions) is better obtained from Life-Style analysis than from any other psychological test. A review of the results showed a great variety of psychodynamic features. Some of the women could be considered "neurotic," most could not. Most had fathers that were dominant, or tried to be, which was a cultural norm for that generation. Some of the mothers were "passive" and "dependent," others were not.

In fact, they had only one psychological factor in common: all of the young women shared a common cultural value—the desire to achieve. The women depreciated the conventional role of wife and mother and believed one was a successful female only when one was both married and had also engaged in a successful "career." Every one of the young women was raised in a competitive, achievement oriented family atmosphere. They were given the metacommunication that marriage, home and family were not "enough" for a woman. A career was also necessary in order to meet expectations.

This is apparently a common value in our culture, for these ideas pervade our society. Thus, the conventional female role has been depreciated even by the mothers of these women. The mothers themselves accepted the value that a woman ought to be "more," that the women who had a family and a career was superior to the woman who only had a family. Transmission of this value led the daughters to prepare for careers plus marriage.

What is the effect of this value? It seems to place an added burden in terms of increased expectation. An ordinary job is not what these girls are looking for; rather, they are looking for a "career." They have had the same education as their male peers and have often gotten better grades. They now are in competition for the same jobs. In any time of job scarcity this competition will become intense. *Time* magazine has taken note of this and states that women cannot "find equality in jobs if jobs are not there. Equality may be possible only in a fairly rapid growing economy" (*Time*, 1976). Women, instead of presenting themselves to males as available for marriage, present themselves to them as competitors.

M.D., an attractive 23 year old, has a Master's degree in journalism from an Ivy League school. She worked part time as a journalist during her years in college, won every award available for her work, and graduated with high honors. The only job she was able to attain after graduation was a "gofer" in a metropolitan newspaper office.

She complains she finds the work “demeaning” and “humiliating,” but lives on the promise of her boss that she will be given an opportunity to write just as soon as an opening comes up.

Even if the young woman finds a job she likes and which gives her the opportunity to express her talent, she still hopes to find the “right” man, marry him, and have children. Every one complains of an inability to establish “closeness” and “companionship” with a man, and all want to get married. Their common cry is “Where are the men?” They date, go to social events, are “fixed up” by friends and relatives, “do the bar scene,” but seldom achieve a satisfying heterosexual relationship, and never seem to find suitable marriage partners.

L.T., age 24, complained that she was allowing herself to be abused by a young man with whom she was in love. He was cruel, critical, unstable, took advantage of her financially, and seldom said a kind word to her. They did have a most satisfying sexual relationship, but recently he admitted to her that he had been having a sexual liaison with a “friend” of hers. L. “went to pieces” and came in asking why she had allowed herself to engage in this kind of destructive relationship with a man; why couldn’t she find somebody kind and nice to marry; and what was wrong with her?

As the women approach the age of thirty, they become strongly concerned about not yet being married or having children. Part of the cultural demand was for a career, but an equally important part was for the women to have husbands and children. In addition there is a “biological imperative.” The urge to reproduce is one of the few firmly rooted instincts of the human race.

S.P. is 30 years old. She came for help when she found herself depressed because she could not persuade her married boyfriend to leave his wife and marry her. She has an eight year history of unfulfilling heterosexual relationships and feels extreme urgency and great pressure from her parents to marry. She has said that if she does not marry within the next five years she will seriously consider having a baby outside of marriage.

Having no outlet for the instinctive urge to reproduce, the young women are frustrated and dissatisfied often without knowing why. In the fight for equality many women joined the marchers in the street leaving behind some precious biological roots—the biological drive to have, raise, and love children. *Time* magazine discusses the novelist Ann Roiphe’s ideas on the subject and suggests:

It is not an argument for sweet maternal submission to the household gods but for an admission that, unless society is transformed in an almost utopian way (far beyond merely providing daycare centers), women cannot free themselves totally from the destiny of raising children. It is also a recognition that the hard choices about families, children and careers cannot be made entirely through cold ideology. (*Time*, 1976)

The article in *Time* magazine is written when certain social phenomena are taking place. Marriage rates are declining, divorce rates are rising, and the number of children per family is decreasing. These social phenomena perhaps indicate some biological attempt on the part of nature to balance the excessive rate of population growth immediately after World War II.

One other factor should be considered. All mating behavior in animals depends upon the production and recognition of effective signals between the sexes. These young women do not seem to use effective mating signals. Even if they know what these signals are, they hesitate to use them because it seems "demeaning" and submitting to male chauvinism.

D.W., age 29, has a seven year history of sexual promiscuity. Her description of all these experiences leads one to believe not one of the men had considered her for marriage. Yet, in each case she fantasied marriage with these boyfriends. Her dress, mannerisms and behavior are such that in a previous generation she would have been considered a "tramp."

F. H., age 26, wanting very much to marry, complains that she seems unable to attract boyfriends. Observation and questioning of her behavior reveals she is both unaware of, and when aware, unwilling to use flirtatious behavior.

People who do not use mating behavior are unlikely to find mates.

Another explanation can be found in the writing of Rudolf Dreikurs, a leading Adlerian social psychologist. He offered the following observations:

Modern woman faces a peculiar predicament. On one hand, she is the product of thousands of years of feminine submission. Consequently, she still looks for the superior man on whom she can lean, and who is strong, reliable, and capable of protecting her. In her growing years she may have experienced such a man in the person of her father, the last remnant of male superiority. And she may seek such a superior male as a mate. But he is hard to

find. It is difficult for any man to be superior to a girl who has had the same education, worldly experience, and training as he, and who, in many instances may have been more successful than her male peers. On the other hand, modern woman is also the product of the twentieth century; a human being who does not want to be inferior and submissive to anyone. (Dreikurs, 1971)

The problem, then, as seen by Adlerians, is that we are going through a phase of transition which will be followed by an "age of Democracy" (Dreikurs, 1971). Society is moving from an autocratic authoritarian past where we knew exactly what was expected of us to a more democratic, egalitarian mode of relationships. Periods of change have historically created conflict and bewilderment concerning social roles. The feminine gender role is not as sharply defined as it once was, and the women cited give evidence of the suffering engendered by the ensuing confusion.

The young men are confused also. They read in the popular press that unless they accept the concepts of women's lib, are willing to share household duties, accept their wives' careers as having equal value, are eager to change diapers and even help deliver the babies . . . unless they accept the responsibility to bring their wives to orgasm . . . unless they see their wives as "PERSONS" not "WOMEN," they are . . . MALE CHAUVINIST PIGS.

Do most men want to marry a "liberated woman"? Probably not. Unknown even to themselves, they probably still want a woman who will make a show of subservience, will care for the household, and take the primary responsibility for raising the children. Today, a young man does not have to marry for companionship; there are many girls who are willing to live with him anyway. He does not have the urge to have children or raise a family since he no longer experiences an increase in self-esteem from becoming "head of the household." He is no longer a "head," he is simply an equal partner.

The male age mates appropriate for the women described above were brought up on *Playboy* magazine and James Bond. The Playboy man was free, independent, had no permanent ties and believed, "There's always a pair of firmer tits down the road." On the one hand they subscribe on the surface to the prevailing social value that the woman should pursue her own interests and career and not live vicariously through a man. On the other hand, they want a woman who will perform the conventional female tasks according to the conventional division of labor. The women described are not acceptable to the men as marriage partners, and neither the men nor the women know why.

Conclusion

Current social changes are in the direction of an egalitarian society and are seen as evolutionary phenomena by Adlerian psychologists (Dreikurs, 1971; Adler, 1970). The change from the previous authoritarian and patriarchal society requires periods of transition. Adlerians point out that it is during periods of transition that changing and contradictory social values become most troublesome and appear as problems in the lives of patients who come to therapists and counselors for help.

The answer by Adlerians is not to roll back the clock, but to understand the difficulties of the population caught up in the change, to understand the contradictory social values themselves and how they affect the individual (even without his/her awareness); and that these cultural values lead to dysfunctional behavior and subsequent unhappiness.

The answer to the problems caused by the transition is through a better understanding of appropriate gender related goals and behaviors; to understand that equality does not mean identity in all things nor does it mean being "the same," and to devise a workable division of labor between the sexes.

Meanwhile, the confusing messages given to some young women result in their dissatisfaction, discontent, unease, and a sense of frustrated purpose.

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