

## ANOMIE, THE SOCIOLOGIST'S CONCEPTION OF LACK OF SOCIAL INTEREST<sup>1, 2</sup>

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Social interest, according to Alfred Adler, is the criterion for mental health (3, p. 154). Through social interest the striving of the individual for superiority or perfection is directed to the socially useful side. Such people "consider themselves a part of the whole, are at home on this earth and in this mankind" (3, p. 159). Lack of social interest, on the other hand, leads to striving on the socially useless side, a self-centered striving for power and superiority over others. "The neurotic with his striving for personal superiority . . . that is all too strongly dissociated from social interest . . . lives as though he were in enemy country" (3, p. 294). But this does not apply to neurotics only. "All failures—neurotics, psychotics, criminals, alcoholics, problem children, suicides, perverts, and prostitutes—are failures because they are lacking in social interest" (3, p. 156).

In recent years, sociologists, quite independently from Adler, have developed a concept very similar to lack of social interest and designated it by the term anomie. Derived from the Greek word *anomia*, the term meant originally lawlessness.

The term was introduced into sociology by Durkheim. The anomie of which he speaks is a function of the condition that in modern society the social solidarity of primitive society has been threatened through the division of labor. Durkheim points out that suicide, one index of anomie, is much more frequent among the civilized than among the simpler peoples (5, p. 785). When properly understood, however, division of labor, one of the chief characteristics of progressing civilization, far from becoming a threat to social solidarity, actually "tends to become the essential condition of social solidarity" (4, p. 446) and its chief source (4, p. 447).

It appears altogether likely that Adler, by 12 years his junior, was influenced by Durkheim, although probably indirectly, since Adler

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<sup>2</sup>Because this short paper has been noted in the sociological literature (6, p. 162n.), yet was published only in mimeographed form, it is reprinted here to make it more readily available.—Ed. note.

does not refer to Durkheim. Adler often speaks of the interrelation of the division of labor and social interest (*Gemeinschaftsgefuehl*), which has occasionally been translated as "sense of human solidarity" (1). Adler says, for example: "Both marriage and occupation demand power of independent action, and readiness to accept the division of labor. These qualities cannot exist without a certain degree of social interest (feeling) and adaptation" (2, p. 148).

In contemporary sociology, the term anomie has undergone a clear extension into psychology. MacIver writes:

Anomie is a state of mind in which the individual's sense of social cohesion—the mainspring of his morale—is broken or fatally weakened. In this detachment of the anomic person from social obligation his whole personality is injured. . . . The anomic fall into various types. . . . First, there are those who live by the hour, seeking immediate gratification on whatever level it is available. . . . Second, there are those who, having lost their ethical goals, having no longer any intrinsic and socialized values to which they can harness their drive to action, transfer this drive to extrinsic values instead, to the pursuit of means instead of to the pursuit of ends beyond them, and particularly to the pursuit of power. They tend to be domineering, sadistic, ruthless, irascible, vain, inherently destructive. Unlike the first type, they live for a future, they have objectives that bind today to the further tomorrow, but these objectives are self-centered, ego-glorifying, bereft of social obligation. . . . Third, we may distinguish a type of anomie that is characterized above all by a fundamental and tragic insecurity, something that cuts deeper than the anxieties and dreads that beset other men. It is the insecurity of the hopelessly disoriented. In the profoundest sense they are "displaced persons." There is, for example, the social alienation of those who feel themselves rejected and become the victims of a persecution complex. This is perhaps the bitterness of all forms of anomie. There is a crushing sense of indignity, of exclusion, of injustice, of defeat, arousing feelings of intense hate, counter-aggressiveness, total revulsion from things as they are, sometimes accompanied by unquiet introspection and self-torture (5, pp. 783-785).

The similarity of this passage to Adler's description of all failures in life as the outcome of lack of social interest is striking.

Riesman goes one step further by distinguishing between the anomic and the autonomous. The anomics range "from overt outlaws to 'catatonic' types who lack even the spark for living, let alone for rebellion" (7, p. 281), corresponding to Adler's failures in life. "The anomic person tends to sabotage either himself or his society, probably both" (7, p. 279). The autonomous, on the other hand, are on the whole "capable of conforming . . . but are free to choose whether to conform or not" (7, p. 278). They are in the Adlerian sense the truly mentally healthy whose social interest does not imply a mere adapta-

tion to immediate reality (3, p. 107), but a courageous, self-reliant and free striving (3, p. 55) for a goal "which would have to signify the ideal community of all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of evolution" (3, p. 142). This distinction is important in view of the frequently found misconception that mental health implies conformity, and that non-conformity in itself is a sign of mental illness.

While with the term anomie sociology has come to describe mental disorder very much in the sense of Adler, there remains a difference with regard to the understanding of the causal relationships. The sociologist is likely to see the cause of anomic behavior in environmental factors. "It is usually not too difficult to explain why someone is anomic, since the tragedies and warpings of life, like germs, are omnipresent, and any personal disaster can be traced back to its 'cause'" (7, pp. 281-282). When environment does not offer a satisfactory explanation, recourse is taken to heredity, although this is done with great caution. "When someone succeeds in the same overt setting in which others have failed, I . . . am sometimes tempted to fall back on constitutional or genetic factors" (7, p. 282). Adler, while fully appreciating the importance of environment and of heredity, accepted neither as the ultimate causal factor. Rather, he postulated the emerging creative power of the individual as the ultimate determiner, in relation to which all objective factors provide only greater or lesser probabilities (3, pp. 205-209).

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