

ON SOCIAL INTEREST IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

SOFIE LAZARFELD

New York, N. Y.

The most basic concept of Adler's theory is expressed by the German word *Gemeinschaftsgefuehl*. This word, as Adler understood it, has no adequate translation, and so I should like, first of all, to try to describe it in its various aspects.

Gemeinschaftsgefuehl is in essence an emotionally positive attitude towards the human race, a feeling of belonging and wanting to belong, the feeling of connectedness of man with man as a universal relationship, an all-embracing bond. It includes the ability to cooperate, and the ability to accept any human being in his own human right. Adler called it an innate potentiality on whose development not only the wholesome development of each individual depends, but also the cementing of society.

Saint Paul describes charity (in German, *Liebe*) in a way which comes very close to Adler's *Gemeinschaftsgefuehl*. Charity also is a sine qua non, and also must be rendered in its many aspects to be properly understood, among others: ". . . it seeketh not her own, . . . beareth all things, . . . hopeth all things, . . . never faileth."

"Social interest" does not convey Adler's concept, but the term has become accepted since Adler himself used it for want of a better one. We shall use it here, regretfully conscious of its shortcomings.

THE GIFT FREELY GIVEN

When we, who were learning to be therapists, asked Adler in which way we could best help to develop the deficient social interest in our clients, he replied that we must treat everyone who comes for help as if he had no social interest at all; that we must accept everyone without conditions or restrictions, purely on the ground that he is a human being and, as such, has the right to be accepted. When we can make him feel this unrestricted and unreserved acceptance as a gift freely given, without asking anything in return, he will gradually learn that this capacity to give freely is a prerequisite for lasting satisfaction even from receiving. Thus he will gain a new perspective, and little by little his style of life will change.

The ideal demand on the therapist to give, and to give without expecting anything in return, is familiar to us all.¹ But it is sometimes hard for the therapist to realize, and to bear in mind continuously, that this demand is fundamentally nothing but the obligation he has assumed by becoming a therapist. Self-doubts may arise as to whether his own social interest is rich enough, whether he can afford to go on giving without receiving. But if he can carry on, he will soon experience that the pure capacity for giving without expecting will enrich his own inner life. Social interest is not like a bank account which diminishes when you draw from it; on the contrary, like any capacity it grows, the more you exercise it. It is like the purse in the fairytale, which never becomes empty no matter how much the child spends, until he tries to keep some of the goldpieces for himself, when all the coins disappear.

Only by giving freely will the therapist be able to help his patients to have confidence in the inexhaustible supply of their own inner resources. This requires infinite patience. A case has been known who showed absolutely no response to the therapist for two years, when suddenly he spoke spontaneously for the first time. From then on he improved rapidly, as if improvement had set in inwardly long before, but the courage to let it come out had been missing.

With this we have reached the core of Adlerian therapy: It is to encourage the patient to have confidence in himself and therefore also in others.

THE NEUROTIC'S PROBLEM

We have found this kind of therapy to be effective in dealing with many different kinds of neurosis. It will be recalled that Adler believed differing symptom patterns were all based on the same lack of self-confidence, on deeply discouraged attitudes towards accomplishing the tasks of life, and lack of social interest. At the same time Adler reminded his students always genuinely to bear in mind, "Every neurotic is partly in the right" (2, p. 24).

In my own experience I have found three types of life styles among the most difficult. The *pirate*, corresponding to Adler's predatory type (I, p. 16), illustrates his pattern by his love-making; like a wild animal on the rampage, he breaks in where others are in possession, because snatching away that which belongs to others seems the height

¹F. C. Thorne has recently in conversation expressed this thought by the question: "Who gives presents to Santa Claus?"—Ed. note.

of desirability and accomplishment. The *fighter* fights for the sake of fighting and winning the battle; the trophy once won is meaningless to him. Thus he can never be satisfied and must go on fighting senselessly. The *fugitive* is so deeply convinced of his unworthiness to succeed that he does not even try to accomplish what he would wish to; he cannot make the necessary effort because he sees it already doomed in anticipation.

It is clear that these patterns, like so many others, have derived from the neurotic's conviction that he cannot hold his own among others. He therefore fears and must avoid any *Gemeinschaft*. When in the therapeutic relationship he experiences that he is being accepted on his own merits, or rather, is being accepted in spite of lacking merits, this is so new an experience that it opens the gates for him. For the first time, in feeling the trust another has in him, he can respond with trust. With the development of this trust in himself and another he will gradually come to lose his fear.

Years after the conclusion of a therapy the author received a letter from a patient, in which he said he was not thanking for skill and knowledge, although he appreciated that, but, "Deep in my heart I thank you for never having lost your confidence in me when I myself had given up long ago."

REFERENCES

1. ADLER, A. *Liebesbeziehungen und deren Störungen*. Vienna: Perles, 1926.
2. ADLER, A. *Problems of neurosis*. London: Kegan Paul, 1929.