

DEMOCRATIC ASSUMPTIONS IN ADLER'S PSYCHOLOGY

ARTHUR G. NIKELLY

University of Illinois Health Service, Urbana, Ill.

As human behavior will vary according to the social context to which it interacts, it would seem that a theory of personality dynamics should take into account these sociological observations. Democratization, which is currently taking place in many parts of the world, is a challenge to preventive psychiatry, for it has brought forth greater stress on personality, thus making the role of trans-cultural psychiatry increasingly important. The more congruous and compatible the assumptions of personality theory and preventive techniques are with the implications of democratic life, the more effective will be the efforts of preventive psychiatry. The dynamics of personality should be congruent with the dynamics of society.

With increasing democratization the individual has fewer restrictions in his social movements and more choices to make which require decisions and involvement. Living in a democracy requires of an individual more thought, planning, and initiative. It emphasizes his awareness of meaningful purposes, and his understanding of the realities of the future. These trends imply the increased roles of consciousness and of the goal-directedness of behavior. These roles depend upon one's individual ability, and upon one's understanding of the democratic process. Democratization necessitates a more conscious effort by an individual towards the achievement of a goal that will fulfill both individual and social ends. His appraisal of behavior calls for the application of values.

The democratic milieu offers one the opportunity to transcend his inherited biological determinants, and to react to the environment in a manner not totally predictable from his past behavior and his basic drives. He can now pursue subjectively determined goals which are significant to him as a unique individual, rather than aspiring according to the expectations of his social class. It is now difficult to predict social status or educational potential simply from personal associations and social experiences in the past. The diminution of classes fosters greater mobility and striving, and one cannot think of such activity without goals. Adaptation to the new demands requires more effort and training, and an ability to interact with a minimum

of interference from antecedent events in one's life. The result is apt to lead to chaos if one has not been trained to make the proper choices.

The present paper will discuss several assumptions, conceptual tools, and techniques of Adler, and will attempt to show how they are related to democratic principles and thus suited to the particular problems arising from the conditions of democratic living.¹

SOCIAL INTEREST

Psychoanalysis maintains that bio-instinctual factors constitute man's basic motivation; this reflects a typically autocratic and conservative orientation. Adler's personality model is based on the principle of ubiquitous inferiority, stemming from the feelings of helplessness created in infancy, and the striving for superiority to overcome them (1). The class system in the autocratic structure concealed these feelings or rendered them dormant. It did not promote personal growth towards self-realization.

The validity of Adler's theory became more apparent when social restrictions weakened, allowing greater freedom for superiority striving. For example, the equalitarian rights of the sexes have furthered the competitive spirit in the family, which is frequently associated with divorce, delinquency, neuroticism, and character disorders. The competitive spirit is strong and will result in conflict when several persons strive for the same personal goal.

There is now greater value placed on signs of achievement and success. Hence, inferiority feelings become intensified in those individuals who have not compensated by striving for a goal which includes social interest. Striving for success, for ascendance, and for self-actualization are natural propensities of personality which the democratic system encourages. Adler's assumptions are more meaningful in our own present democratic setting, than they were in Central Europe during the early part of the century.

Adler's rationale underlying the technique of psychotherapy is in essential agreement with democratic ideology. He postulated that man has the innate capacity for social interest, the ability for cooperation, for the feeling of belonging to society, and for responsibility for the welfare of others. Through social interest man can over-

¹Several years ago Rudolf Dreikurs noted that Adler's system presupposes social equality and thus "may well eventually be recognized as the democratic concept of man" (*Group psychotherapy and the third revolution in psychiatry. Int. J. soc. Psychiat.*, 1955, 1 (3), 23-32). While Dreikurs touched on several points made in the present paper, he did not elaborate on these.—Ed. note.

come his personal weaknesses which are more readily exposed because of the competitive and striving tendencies in the democratic milieu. Adler's main technique in psychotherapy is to assist the patient to overcome his feelings of inferiority by strengthening his social feeling. Therapy consists in providing the patient with a new experience in cooperation. This is the antidote against the antagonism and competition that democracy breeds. Adler states: "Psychotherapy is an exercise in cooperation and a test of cooperation" (2, p. 72).

GOALS AND VALUES

Adler emphasized the goal-directedness of behavior. Maladjustment occurs when goals are unrealistic and erroneous, and are not conducive either to the individual's personal growth or to society's welfare. With the dissolving of class and status distinctions, many more choices and goals are at man's disposal by which to suit his needs and talents. This renders him more failure-conscious and more prone to formulate unattainable goals in life, such goals often being safeguarding mechanisms against his own inferiority. The practical applicability of goal-directedness has a special advantage as a psychotherapeutic tool (3).

Individual Psychology gives greater responsibility to the conscious aspects of the patient's personality than to the innate or situational factors. The objective is to free him from any useless safeguards and to help him achieve normal functioning, independently of antecedent and supposedly causative factors. To be attached to past social and constitutional determinants is a vestige of the autocratic philosophy of living, in which one's predicament depended largely on social status, and tends to lessen one's accountability for his behavior.

The awareness of one's personal goals as motivating factors is all the more valuable in a democratic society, because this emphasizes the individual's responsibility for his actions. In more autocratic social systems, external control and structuring of behavior did not call for much individuality. Roles were more or less stable. The aim of behavior was to fit into the *status quo*, rather than to realize potentialities. The undesirable consequences of one's behavior were looked upon as something over which the individual had little control, rather than something which indicated personal inadequacy.

Freud patterned his theory after the assumptions of an autocratic society, reducing behavior to basic drives. However, exper-

ience has shown that drives are irrelevant in the development of pathology, and that they may become strong or weak in a particular case depending upon the individual's attitudes and values. Drives become a means for neurotic or antisocial expression, and are subsumed and guided by the individual's values and attitudes which are part of his conscious functioning.

Democratization allows for more impulse expression of superiority and masculine identification, with a resultant increase in delinquency. To invoke "unconscious" factors for such behavior is to invite defeat in its treatment. On the contrary, conscious determinants of behavior, attitudes and values, as most therapists would agree, are the important factors in the re-orientation of adolescents and young adults. To make the individual's "unconscious" known to him is not as effective a mental-health procedure as preparing him for survival and growth by giving him socially oriented safeguards which he can experience in a meaningful way.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Encouragement is another of Adler's therapeutic techniques which is significant in the democratic milieu. Although democratization fosters the growth of individual potential, such growth may not always take place because this new social structure in itself is not sufficient. The individual not only needs to know his potentials but must have faith and conviction that he will succeed if he tries. There may be a maximum of endowment for success, but, because of the uncertainty due to the lack of external structure in the open-class system, self-realization may not materialize. Hence, the individual easily develops doubts about his ability, and he becomes unsure about his position in his social group. He is unable to reach a full development unless inspired with hope and courage. Safeguards against failure and loss of self-esteem are formed which lead to the typical passive-aggressive behavior which seems excessive in our time.

Adolescents and young adults very often doubt their ability to do anything constructive, and act as if they were sure of their inability to succeed. The development of trust in themselves, of the feeling that they can change their undesirable behavior when given the opportunity, is the main purpose of encouragement. Likewise, the credo of democratic philosophy is to promote the theme of opportunity for all: that one can function differently when the favorable circumstances are provided. This ability to change may be achieved by

the therapist's expression of social interest, an encouragement which reduces inferiority feelings in the patient and sets in motion his own social interest. Social interest is a challenge to one's courage before he ever puts to proof the power of his ability.

EQUALITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Finally, democracy implies equality of rights, privileges, and opportunities. Adler pointed out the merits of the equalitarian approach to psychotherapy: Neither the patient nor the therapist should exercise a superior role upon each other. The patient must perceive the therapist as an equal, a friend, a co-worker, one who does not show authority or superiority over the patient. The patient learns to feel that he is neither superior nor inferior to anyone. The therapist is always neutral to the patient's challenges, whose dependency or aggressive behavior is interpreted as manifestations of superiority striving with which the therapist must deal in a non-manipulative manner. The therapist does not encourage transference from the patient because it implies passivity to authority.

Just as in the process of democratization, power has been taken from the authority of a single individual, and the reciprocal interaction of many persons placed in its stead, so in therapy there is less emphasis on the treatment of the patient by the single therapist, and greater significance on the consensus and the influence of the group. The democratic environment fosters the tendency toward group decisions and away from individual decisions, thus removing the responsibility from one person in authority and placing it equally upon everyone. Adler originated psychotherapy before a group, in which the members at times helped correct the patient's cognitive distortions. This is far more in line with the democratic spirit than the single interview therapy.

Furthermore, Adler made the patient feel himself responsible for the attainment of his adjustment; it is *his* success, not the therapist's. To require an outside agent to act upon the patient, as in the case of medication by the attending physician, assumes a basic overpowering weakness which makes the patient lean on others; and he is denied the opportunity to learn to overcome his difficulty. Adler discourages the development of a passive attitude towards the therapist's probing of "the unconscious," because it tends to lead into a father-child relationship, and to hamper the patient's independence.

The therapist's superior role is antithetical to democratic ideals,

since equality implies the same amount of responsibility and energy for all concerned. The superior role requires more activity, no matter how subtle it may be, and it relegates the patient to an inferior position. If the aim of the therapeutic situation is, to a certain extent, the elimination or decrease of inferiority feelings, then there should be no superior-inferior condition in the interpersonal therapeutic relationship.

SUMMARY

Democratization has increased the potential for everyone's self-realization, but has also opened the way to competitive conflict and the choice of unrealistically high personal goals. Adler's psychology, with its assumption of universal striving for ascendance and ability for social interest, is in accordance with the principles of democracy and contributes understanding and techniques to help both in realizing the opportunities of democracy and in dealing with the problems which arise when individuals do not meet its demands. Adlerian psychotherapy, which is especially well suited to use in groups, makes the individual aware of his goals, and through a cooperative, equalitarian, and encouraging approach, develops his social interest, a particular necessity in an open society. As preventive psychiatry, Adler's approach meets the present-day requirements in the field of mental health.

REFERENCES

1. ADLER, A. *The practice and theory of Individual Psychology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927.
2. ADLER, A. *What life should mean to you*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1931.
3. NIKELLY, A. Goal-directedness: a practical goal for psychotherapy. *Ment. Hyg., N. Y.*, 1962, 46, 523-526.