

## Alfred Adler 1870 - 1937

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“One of the heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century...”

### Alfred Adler:

In April 2011, John Clifford Austrian Consul in Scotland spoke of his deep respect and admiration for what Alfred Adler had contributed to the world. John described Adler as a pioneering figure in the quest to unlock “the genius in human nature” (Wadsley, 2011). John noted that Adler “made it (human nature) understandable to ordinary people.”. John also pointed out how Adler valued social democracy and socialism. Adler’s values grew from his early life experiences which influenced his decision to become a doctor and then motivated him to work with people who were the least advantaged in society. Furthermore John recognised that Adler brought awareness to the “most obvious things (yet) least well known”, meaning that although, on the face of it, some of his ideas seemed simple, once used as ways to understand human nature, many depths of awareness and understanding could become possible. I would call his endeavour to share his ideas in understandable ways, the democratisation of knowledge, Freud and others did not share and has been a factor in his contribution to the world of psychology becoming largely unseen in the present day.

### Adler and Living Educational Theory (LT):

Looking back across more than thirty years of studying and applying Adler’s ideas and now three as a LT practitioner researcher, I have come to conclude that the values and endeavours of Adlerian Psychotherapists sit alongside and can enhance mine and other’s appreciation of some of the core concepts of Living Theory’s educational research. These include the concepts of embodied knowledge, living values experienced as life affirming energy, striving to live consistently with expressions of living values that bring meaning and purpose to life (Whitehead 2008). In recent dialogue with my research group I am becoming increasingly interested in the explorations of Early Recollections, an Adlerian technique of personality assessment, becoming a tool for understanding, explaining and evaluating the emergence of living values. Just such an exploration said me in revealing a contradiction to one of my values, children’s and young people’s freedom and autonomy.

Finding ways to explore, understand, evaluate and explain patterns of influence within social formations, as LT does, for example, I have also come to discover that Adler’s concept of social interest embodies a set of social values that can be observed in action from video recorded conversations between LT researchers and Adlerian practitioners. These ways of relating one with another illustrate the emergence of embodied expressions

of cooperation, contribution, connection and mutual respect, actions witnessed and written about which Adlerians would agree to be embodying social interest.

Within the context of practitioner-research, Dadds (2008) raised a useful idea for practitioner researchers, that she called empathic validity. She claims that empathic validity is a process that explains influence on the emotional disposition of people towards each other. She distinguished between internal empathic validity, related to internal influences within practitioner-researchers and external empathic validity that influences both research participants and audiences who are influenced by the public sharing of the knowledge created. This is a useful concept to apply to explaining the presence of social interest. Community feeling, a closely related, but different concept, then emerges as embodied expressions of ease, belonging and mutuality, with others (Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1956).

### **Adlerian Research Group:**

Each week our Adlerian Skype Research Group meets. Week by week we record our sessions creating a body of evidence of the relationships we have create one with another. Our “communicative action” has been sustained for over three years, as Habermas described: “...undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified.” (Habermas, 1976, pp. 2-3). We continuously demonstrate how group interactive processes, when recorded as still and video images and then shared, can create knowledge to be shared with other Adlerians ([www.spanglefish.com/RobynPound](http://www.spanglefish.com/RobynPound)) We can review our non-verbal as well as our verbal illustrations of relational dynamics within our group. By applying the meanings of social interest and community feeling, we can create explanations of meaning that relate to what Adler contended was a predisposition in all humans, social interest. It is “rooted as a potential, not as an actual ability.” This is where social interest comes in and identifies the influences on children, such as parental and educational, needed to engender the actions that express social interest

Using our references to social interest in our research group we have discovered explanations for wellbeing that can be more readily understood, collectively. Adler determined that a person who is mentally healthy engages productively with their community. (La Voy et al, 2013) He connected mental health with feelings of being valued through making contributions that evoke social connection among people (Ansbacher and Ansbacher 1956).

### **Influences - Some Adlerian Perspectives:**

In LT research the researcher has to generate a valid explanation of their educational influence in their own learning, the learning of others and the learning of social formations in which they live and work. I argue that, when understood by the researcher “a self consistent unity” expressed as: “thinking, feeling, willing and acting.” [personality] (Adler 1957) which Adler wrote about, enables an expanding explanation of influence in all its layers. I am connecting this idea with Adler’s contention that the potential of social interest is rooted in human babies (ibid). My optimism and endeavours as a LT researcher is directed toward living my values consistently and discovering times when lived contradictions to those values reveal my focus for the development of my effectiveness. From an Adlerian perspective I would acknowledge living contradictions as indicative of experiencing feelings of inferiority that would be useful to explore and understand.

Adler's theory of personality acknowledges babies' and young children's capacity to be self-determined; receivers from their environment, and creators of an integrated system of self (personality) that generates a consistent pattern of movement through life, unless self-awareness grows sufficiently from childhood onward, to enable a reorientation of the personality system. Personality forms within a developing network of influences experienced through a person's internal environment and external environment which extends as their social environment expands beyond the immediate family. There is a growing interest in our Adlerian Research Group on uncovering what influences a person's decisions to identify specific living values to place their emphasis on. I have discovered that it takes time to identify one's living values and to recognise the purpose they serve in seeking to feel connected and at ease in life and where the exploration of Early Recollections, using the Adlerian structure for exploring them, comes in.

### **Adlerian Psychology as a Social Movement:**

Coming back to social interest, I believe it was Adler's value system, socialist views and optimism that combined with his sheer dedication and passion to captured the hearts and minds of his contemporaries in Scotland just before his death, in 1937. Their respect for him was clear in the newspaper reports as well as the respect and compassion shown to his funeral arrangements and to his family, on his sudden death. From considerable knowledge of his writings, I have discovered many ways he himself lived the values he explained in terms of his concept, social interest. He spoke about: "Individual Psychology [Adlerian Psychology] speaking at its loudest with its emphasis on social interest." Adler 1957)

Adler's ideas around the individual and community provide a possible social philosophy that creates possible pathways through human existence (La Voy et al, p288). According to Henry Stein, a proponent of the Classical Adlerian approach, Adler and Maslow were: "Devoted to optimal human development." Stein (2017). Classical in-depth psychotherapy aims for people to be able to hold consistency between their stated ideals, their attitudes and behaviour. Together with their clients, families, couples individuals and communities, striving for a world where people flourish in an atmosphere of equality and social inclusion as they accept personal responsibility and take initiatives in their continuous development.

### **To sum up:**

In common with LT research, Adlerian Psychology is a values based approach concerned with the continuous development of humanity. It becomes a challenge to hold the two as separate entities at times, I speak as an Adlerian and LT researcher. Adler made a bold statement in his paper on the progress of mankind where he contended that:

"With the limitations of our senses and our limited understanding of the ultimate truths, rational science speaks the last word. At this point Individual Psychology speaks loudest with its emphasis on the whole and on social interest." (Adler 1957)

I think LT shares this place of speaking loudest, in its accompanying emphasis on self-study practitioner research as a social movement that promotes the flourishing of humanity. Not only does LT research challenging the reductionism of "rational science", it also opens up new possibilities for the creation of knowledge and furtherance of those values necessary to its aims, as each new researcher contributes to its educational knowledge base through their unique explanations of: "How I improve my practice."

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