

A “SUPER” THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORY OF INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Fundamental Adlerian principles of human behaviour can be illustrated with the “SUPER” acronym developed by Eckstein & Kern (2002). Each respective letter represents a major theoretical Adlerian belief. The present article is revised and updated from the original model.

S ocial Interest	U nity	P riate Logic	E quality	R easons of Purpose
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Social Interest

Social Interest or *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* is the most distinctive concept in Adlerian Individual Psychology. It is, however, also the most difficult to define and one of the major concepts that has received the least recognition in the general psychological literature. The German *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* is typically translated as “social interest” or “social feeling” (Ansbacher, 1991). There is no accurate English word that seems to communicate the German sense of “community”. Some early translations used “community feeling” or “community sense” instead, and O’Connell (1981) proposed the term “humanistic identification”.

Abraham Maslow (as cited in Ansbacher, 1991) credited Adler’s belief in Social Interest as a primary description of self-actualised individuals. Maslow defined it as follows:

“This word (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl* - Social Interest) ... is the only one available that described well the flavor of the feeling for mankind by self-actualizing subjects. They have, for human beings in general, a deep feeling of identification, sympathy, and affection in spite of occasional anger, impatience or disgust. ... It is as if they were all members of a single family” (p. 5).

Social Interest is a “barometer” of effective mental health; conversely, mental illness is characterised as the absence of social interest. Nikelly (1971) advocates social interest as a “paradigm” for mental health or model for viewing the world:

“Behavior anomalies are essentially characterized by an inability to deal with social reality, a lack of communal cooperation, and unpreparedness for social living. The issue becomes clear as one responds to the fundamental questions: ‘How much do others gain from my behavior? Do my actions enhance others?’ By nature man is a social being, and it is the social feeling that has to be cultivated” (p. 17).

Existentialist philosophers have used the term *anomie* (lawlessness) to indicate the antithesis of social interest (Ansbacher, 1991). Eckstein and Kern (2002) note that:

“Anomie is a condition in which an individual’s sense of social cohesion is broken or fatally weakened. Such a detachment from a feeling of ‘embeddedness’ or ‘connectedness’ to others results in various anti-social behaviour types. For example, immediate personal gratification, personal power through domination and destruction, insecurity and dread as ‘displaced persons’ who feel rejected and thus feel victims of a persecution complex are but some of the ways people who experience the ruthlessness of anomie may react. It is as if such people have lost their ‘existential anchors’ and thus drift aimlessly with no direction. They are tumbled by the ‘sea of life’. Having no existential anchor often results in ‘drowning’ (death) or severe emotional damage to such individuals” (p. 5).

“Rebellious” Social Interest - The notion of social interest is not to be confused with adaptation out of blind obedience or of conformity to authority. Nationalism, racism, sexism and ageism too often typify prevalent societal norms. The rebellion or confrontation of such systems and individuals characterises aspirations of a better world for all people. Social Interest paradoxically may take the form of civil disobedience to preserve the environment. Rebellion may actually have considerable community focus. The goals of such rebellion are motivated by a sense of social interest, a concern for the highest good of all life.

Social Interest should be the yardstick by which an individual measures what the Buddhists call the path of “right action”. Such legendary individuals as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. have been imprisoned and/or assassinated for their “insurrections” and “traitorous” behaviour. Yet a higher commitment to such universal principles as non-violence and basic civil liberties are contemporary examples of “rebellious” Social Interest.

Social Interest: Behaviours, Feelings and Thoughts - Kaplan (1991) has described in very concrete ways the specific behaviours, feelings and cognitions (thoughts) associated with Social Interest:

“Behaviors Associated with Social Interest: Helping, Sharing, Participating, Respect, Cooperation, Compromise, Empathy, Encouragement, and Reforming.

Feelings Associated with Social Interest: Belonging, Feeling at home, Commonality, Faith in others, Being Human, and Optimism.

Cognitions (Thoughts) Associated with Social Interest: ‘As a human being, my rights and obligations are equal to the rights and obligations of others;’ ‘My personal goals can be attained in ways consistent with the welfare of the community;’ ‘The ultimate measure of my character will be to what extent I promote the welfare of the community’” (p. 83).

The more a person behaves, feels and thinks as charted above, the more others will respond positively to him or her. This enhances

self-confidence, which further expands Social Interest for both present reality and for building a better future. A balance of practicality and idealism also highly correlates with a high degree of mental health as well.

Social Interest and Psychological Tolerance - Slavik and Croake (as cited in Eckstein & Roy, 2002) suggest that Social Interest is actually more understandable by recourse to Adler's concept of psychological tolerance.

“Psychological tolerance is the amount of threat a person can face without choosing anger and leaving a situation, ‘caving in’ to despair or fear, renouncing one’s ability to handle a situation or, in general, withdrawing” (p. 6).

Psychological tolerance is plainly related to habitual styles of safeguarding through distancing, to habitual styles of exclusion tendencies, to antithetical modes of apperception and to limitations in courage. A measure of psychological tolerance would be a measure of one’s lack of willingness to stand out and display *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*.

Unity

In contrast to Freudian theory, which refers to such separate “parts” of the personality as “id”, “ego” and “superego”, or the transactional analysis “parent”, “adult” and “child” ego states, Adler stressed the unity or wholeness of an individual. Like the flower that came from a single fertilised cell, we are a unit. We are not an assemblage of parts like a machine. The term *individual* in German has the connotation and denotation of unity, an indivisible whole. It refers to the unique individuality of individuals.

The unity of personality is what Adler called one’s style of life. The concept of style includes the characteristic of cutting across ordinary boundaries and uniting what might otherwise be separate entities. Thus, in the case of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, if one knows their music at all, one can easily match the musical manuscripts with the composer. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher &

Ansbacher, 1956) used the metaphor of the musical “notes” versus the total “melody” in the following way:

“The style of life commands all forms of expression; the whole commands the parts. In real life we always find a confirmation of the melody of the total self, of the personality, with its thousand fold ramifications ... The foremost task of individual psychology is to prove this unity in each individual - in his thinking, feeling, acting in his so-called conscious and unconscious, in every expression of his personality ... we are not satisfied with the Gestalt alone, or, as we prefer to say, with the whole, once all the notes are brought into reference with the melody. We are satisfied only when we have recognized in the melody the author and his attitudes as well, for example: Bach and Bach’s style of life” (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, p. 175).

The growing popularity of holistic health and holistic medicine is based on the mind/body/spirit interrelationship. An emerging discipline known as psycho-neuro-immunology (PNI) explores such topics as the breakdown of the immune system as the total interrelated emotional and physical united self is disrupted.

Rudolph Dreikurs and Holistic Medicine - A theme issue of the *Journal of Individual Psychology* (1997, 53[2]) was devoted to a manuscript on holism by Rudolf Dreikurs. As Carr and Bitter (ibid.) note in their introduction to this manuscript:

“Dreikurs sought the perspective of human integration; giving primary consideration to the totality (wholeness) of the individual, he regarded the psychic and somatic as two aspects of the individual and two angles of observation ... The holistic (Gestalt) perspective that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts is transformed into dynamic integration and movement in Dreikurs’ presentation” (p. 123).

Dreikurs (ibid.) believed that a holistic approach is an essential concept underlying any therapeutic intervention.

“We have to treat the individual, not his body or his mind. It has been generally accepted that one cannot treat simply a sick organ: it is the whole organism which is sick. ... Symptomatic treatment will always have its place and value; but unless it is subordinated to and guided by the needs of the total individual, it will be insufficient and in some cases even damaging” (p. 130).

Private Logic

Out of the countless events occurring in one's life, each individual personally decides what “and therefore”. Conclusions are drawn about life in general, others and one's self. Such “private” or “personal” decisions relate to the philosophical field known as phenomenology. Although Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) never specifically used that term, he spoke of the need of a counsellor's empathy in understanding the personal views of another individual by saying that we must be able “to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another” (p. 135). Phenomenology means that one does not experience reality objectively; instead, it is subjectively “filtered” through our own personal “prescriptive” lens, our own “glasses” that uniquely focus the world. In such a way we “distort” or “shape” objective reality to confirm our own internal attitudes.

Myers & Myers (1973) use the creative analogy of fishing net sizes to illustrate private logic. For example, if one has a net of three inches, that person might say: “The fish here are three inches in diameter or larger.” Conversely, a seven inch meshed net would yield fish seven inches in size or larger diameter. It is the size of the nets that determines the size of the fish count. Myers & Myers (ibid.) conclude their “net” analogy in a manner that provides an excellent illustration of a private logic:

“We have nets in our heads. These nets are not made of threads, but of past learning, past experiences, motives, fears,

desires, and interests; these nets act as a filter so the stimuli from our environment go through that filter to be perceived. Of course, each one of us has his own little net, his own little personal, individual filter. Even though we may be placed in the same environment, we will not see it in the same way since we will filter different aspects. Most of us are not even aware that this filtering process is happening. Many of us have defective filters. Filters that are so clogged up that we see very little of what's going on. Some of us have filters that distort the stimuli that come to us through the environment. The important thing to remember, though, is that whenever we make a comment about something we are not describing the something but rather our net, our filter" (p. 33).

Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) believed that the individual was an active participant in the creation of the style of life. This subjective creation is shaped at a very early age, as a result of interactions within the family unit. According to Adler, it is from this subjective view of life (which he called the "schema of apperception") that the individual constructs a "private logic". One's private logic is the collection of attitudes and reactions the individual has about life, and his or her place in it. Adler stated that:

"In considering the structure of a personality, the chief difficulty is that its unity, its particular style of life and goal, is not built upon objective reality, but upon the subjective view that the individual takes of the facts of life" (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 183).

Peluso (2006) notes that a beginning sense of one's personal "this is me" style takes place by about the age of six (with some variability due to individual and/or cultural differences). It is at this time that children make decisions about their place in the world. The social feeling (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*) innately possessed by the individual and the extent to which it gets expressed, is tied into the

overall family atmosphere and the conclusions that the individual draws from it. Hence, the family, or the family equivalent, is the prototypical social group for the child. It plays a crucial role related to the development of this private logic and eventual Life Style.

According to Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956), this Life Style becomes the response set for life, and is the common thread that weaves together an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions into a coherent pattern. In the personality theory, there are contrasting "state" and "trait" issues. The former is more situational "in the moment"; the latter is more long-term, throughout life. Like the Jungian concept of "temperament", Life Style is more of a life-long personality trait. Adlerians summarise core Life Style convictions as:

"Life is _____."
Others are _____."
I am _____."
Therefore I must _____."

This is not to say that the style of life is static and unchanging, but that it comprises the stable and predictable aspects of the person throughout his or her life. In fact, Adlerians believe that individuals can learn how to make their particular style of life work better for them either through life experiences or psychotherapy (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Gladwell (2005) introduces a concept similar to the notion of Life Style in his description of what are called "fists". He writes that:

"Morse code is made up of dots and dashes, each of which has its own prescribed length. But no one ever replicates those prescribed lengths perfectly. When operators send a message ... they vary the spacing or stretch out the dots and dashes or combine dots and dashes and spaces in a particular rhythm. Morse code is like speech. Everyone has a different voice" (p. 27).

Gladwell notes that such fists emerge naturally and most do not even know their own peculiarities. Although the senders did not try to be distinctive, it simply occurred because “some part of their personality appears to express itself automatically and unconsciously in the way they work the Morse code keys” (p. 29). Just as people have “psychological fingerprints,” so too senders of Morse code had their own distinctive recognisable style known as “fists” in that tradition.

With regard to the clinical implications, personality disorders, mental illness and other problematic symptoms and/or behaviour *cannot* be separated from the style of life. Moreover, the clinician must recognise that the style of life is neither all good nor all bad, but rather the result of the individual being placed (or placing him or herself) in difficult, overwhelming situations, and having a creative solution (usually in the form of some psychological “symptom” or problem) to deal with it. This creative solution takes on a *paradoxical* nature when the client comes to therapy to have the problem “fixed”. The paradox is that it was the client’s present application of their unique style of life that has created it in the first place (Peluso, 2005).

Equality

Equal political, economic and social rights are considered to be the essence of democratic ideology. Equality is also a pivotal principle of Adlerian psychology by replacing the authoritarian stance with a dialogue between equals in an atmosphere of mutual respect, candour and acceptance. Adler’s term “masculine protest” was formulated as a precursor to the sexism upon which the woman’s movement was founded. In a culture that inherently values that which can be defined as “masculine” over what it defines as “feminine,” both men and women suffer negative consequences. For women, the “protest” has to do with over-valuing the masculine; for men, paradoxically they too struggle in having an almost unattainable ideal of a “real man” to which they are often measured.

Equality may be demonstrated by describing the “vertical” versus the “horizontal” in terms of relationships with others. The “horizontal” approach to life views all people as being equally worthy of respect and consideration, although people are obviously unequal in some other respects. Such equality does not mean sameness but rather a “no more or less than one” whole human being whose basic birthright is unconditional mutual respect and dignity.

By contrast the “vertical” approach measures people in a “one-up” or “one-down” perspective. “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the fairest one of all,” the Queen in Snow White implores. “Better than/less than” characterises the vertical approach, whereas “different than” is the horizontal perspective.

An apple is neither “better nor worse” than an orange (vertical plane) rather, it is merely “different” (horizontal). Like the law of gravity that results in a spring inevitably flowing down to the level of the ocean, Dreikurs said there is a principle among human beings that results in a specific type of instability when one person or group sets itself up as superior to another. That is, those who are put in the inferior position inevitably will strive to remove that inferiority, and in a vertical-striving world, they will seek to become superior to those who pushed them down towards inferiority. Dreikurs (1953) referred to this as Alfred Adler’s “iron-clad logic of social living.”

Adler discusses the horizontal view as leading to contentment and happiness, while the vertical view means one is “on a ladder”, viewing others “up” and “down.” Social Interest is related to mental health based on equality and democratic living in contrast to striving for a personal superiority that is “above” others. Dreikurs (1973) wrote:

“The vertical movement of self-elevation, regardless of the height it leads to, both in status and accomplishments, can never bring lasting satisfaction and inner peace. There is a constant danger of falling and failing; the gnawing feeling of real or possible inferiority is never eradicated, regardless of

success. There is no sense of security possible on the vertical plane; one remains highly vulnerable. The competitive individual can stand competition only when he wins” (p. 116).

Dreikurs (ibid.) contrasts the vertical and the horizontal planes in the following manner:

“Quite different is the function of horizontal movement. The desire to be useful can never be frustrated. Self-fulfilment no longer depends on what others think or do, but on what one can contribute” (p. 117).

Adler maintained that people are affected by broader social and economic factors and that illness is often the outcome of adverse social circumstances that can be prevented. His observation on people on low-incomes struggling against those striving for power led him to make the association between a poor standard of living and a marginalisation from mainstream society that weakens social feeling. For this reason, he advocated that the helping professions align themselves with the economic, political and social demands of the working class. Adler disliked political activities based on power and competition, and generally was, publicly, politically neutral. Instead, he stressed community feeling and social usefulness in individuals and families, and in civic groups. He felt those values could be instilled through the State schools with teachers and parents serving as role models (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Eva Dreikurs Ferguson (2004), daughter of Rudolf Dreikurs, points out the important distinction between equality and sameness using the teacher-pupil classroom relationship.

“Social equality does *not* mean a vote is taken on what is studied or how it is studied, but rather, the expertise of the teacher is accepted as the best means for contributing to students’ learning. The teacher’s expertise permits the teacher to have influence with regard to the content of classroom

activities, and this is *situational*. To make this important distinction – of differentiating according to *situational influence* – is a crucial aspect of democratic processes and of the Adlerian model of social equality” (p. 12).

Coupling the construct of “social equality” with the “needs of the situation” forms another contribution of Adlerian theory. Adlerians who have observed human actions in line with this distinction have found that when individuals are sure of their value (feel socially equal), these individuals do not feel threatened by the greater expertise of those with more experience or more knowledge and skill. They do not confuse equality of value with equality of influence in a given situation, whereas when individuals are least sure of their human value, they are most likely to confuse situational value with personal value (Dreikurs, 1973).

The illusion of difference creates separation of judgment, which often is expressed by either an inferior or a superior belief. Remember, red blood is the common denominator for all human beings and DNA is the “building block” common to all life forms on earth. Equality is a fundamental Adlerian principle. Just as kings and monarchies are giving way to democratic forms of government, interpersonal relationships are shifting from an inferior or superior vertical comparison to a more encouraging/connected orientation of “all life shares the same basic DNA molecules and God don’t make no junk” (Eckstein & Kern, 2002), p. 7).

Reasons or Purpose

Reasons for one’s behaviour or its motivators can be reframed as purposeful or goal-directed. Almost everyone is striving for some type of significance or perfection. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) disagreed with Freud’s emphasis that people are driven by instincts or moulded by heredity, experience or environment. Rather, it was goals or a “guiding self-ideal” that energised individuals in a chosen direction. He stressed that:

“Individual psychology . . . developed out of the effort to understand that mysterious creative power of life. This power is teleological - it expresses itself in the striving after a goal” (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 19).

Teleology (from the Greek telos - goal) means “purposive, moving toward goals”. Adler (1927) wrote: “Only when we know the effective direction-giving goal of a person may we try to understand his movements” (p. 13). Basic life goals, while generally unknown to the person, give direction to all behaviour. To the extent that goals are aligned with Social Interest, the direction of the person’s life is useful, positive and healthy. Conversely, if goals lack Social Interest and are simply an expression for overcoming perceived inferiorities by achieving personal superiority, the direction of the person’s life tends to be useless, negative and unhealthy (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Dreikurs (1973) identified four classic “misguided” or “mistaken goals” of behaviour which are formulated in early childhood: undue attention, power, revenge, and inadequacy. These are shorthand explanations/descriptions of consistent patterns of misbehaviour in children. Dreikurs declared that all misbehaviour in children could be understood from the perspective of one of these four goals. These goals were largely non-conscious in children because a lack of awareness facilitates fluidity of action and safeguards the child from having to consciously confront the uselessness of certain behaviours.

Such goals are discouraged methods of striving for significance. Striving for significance is in essence a movement towards fulfilment of the goal to achieve unique identity as well as to belong. This movement towards a unique identity is the motivating force behind all human activity, which can be called a type of “master motive”. Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer & Sperry (1987) note that:

“Adlerians see this process too, from a teleological rather than causal perspective - as a pull by the goal rather than a push by the drive. ... A question counsellors always ask themselves is: ‘How is the person seeking to be known?’ Most ways of behaving that are eventually accepted by the person reflect the current concept of the self” (p. 44).

Another way of reflecting on how our behaviour is purposeful and goal-directed relates to Kefir’s (1972) concept of the number one priority. This priority or “top card” is determined on the basis of the person’s answers to the questions, “What is most important in my quest for belonging?” and, “What must I avoid at all costs?” Kefir originally defined four number one priorities: comfort, pleasing, control and superiority. Dewey (1978) also notes that, although it is often difficult for an individual to determine his or her own Life Style, the relative order of priorities is generally recognisable.

The following chart compares the four priorities with what is to be avoided at all costs:

Number one priorities:

Comfort
Pleasing
Control
Superiority

To be avoided at all costs:

Stress
Rejection
Humiliation
Meaninglessness

Although people seldom give up their number one priority, it is possible to become more aware through insight and to “catch oneself” being over-involved in each priority. Eckstein (2002) developed a questionnaire for couple and family counselling based on such a “number one priority” concept.

Adler used various terms, such as the need for completion, mastery, perfection and the guiding fiction, before finally settling on superiority as the master motive. What Manaster and Corsini (1982) call a “growth drive” is similar to Maslow’s “self-actualisation”. Carl Rogers (1951) similarly described the

“upwardly light” seeking tendency towards growth when he observed the “the organism has a basic tendency and striving - to actualise, maintain and enhance the experiencing organism” (p. 487). Just as a plant will move and bend to be facing a source of light, so too does the individual move and bend towards achieving a sense of significance. People move towards self-selected goals that they feel will give them a place in the world, will provide them security and will preserve their self-esteem. Life is a dynamic striving.

The purpose of this article has been to provide an overview of how the acronym SUPER, referring to Social Interest, Private Logic, Equality and Reason (or Purpose), can be used as one way of introducing core Adlerian theoretical contributions to the helping professions.

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