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Adlerian Group Interventions on Workplace Behavior



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Synonyms

Behavior as communication and purpose;
Encouragement; *Social interest/social feeling*

Alfred Adler was the first therapist of the modern era to apply group intervention methods in school-based community child-guidance centers in front of parents and teachers from the Vienna schools. This developed into open forum family education centers in Vienna and beyond (Sonstegaard 1998, p. 217). These same group methods have been applied in the corporate workplace (Cox and Dreikurs Ferguson 2016, p. 333). Just as the striving from a minus to a plus situation – towards overcoming, success, superiority, or perfection – is the master motive in Adlerian psychology, so *social interest/social feeling* is the cardinal personality trait, with traits regarded as reflecting “the relationship of an individual to his environment” (Ansbacher 1968, p. 131). Adlerian therapy is holistic and a psychology of use and so requires therapists to understand individuals in all their activities: family,

workplace, culture, and society. Adler sees human beings who create goals, both immediate and long-term, and which motivate both behavior and development. Behavior is thus understood at three levels: how the individual is behaving; what purpose the behavior serves for the individual and the goal intended; and the motivational or cognitive “why” which is at the root of the behavior in question, and where interventions must focus (Adler 1979, p. 52; Nicoll 2015, p. 32).

Introduction

Shulman (1981) reported on short-term Adlerian group psychotherapy in a US Army Post Stockade, “Many felt it was the first time they had been treated like adult human beings. As their self-esteem grew, they could value others more highly” (pp. 174–179). Shulman related that the group cohesiveness and *social feeling* carried over to other stockade situations, and that these soldiers felt quite superior to those who did not have the advantage of a “psychiatric education.”

Hamm et al. (2016) reported on an Adlerian group intervention with emotionally troubled youth in a residential treatment center that was combined with positive psychology techniques such as a gratitude journal, forgiveness, and focusing on participants’ strengths rather than weaknesses. These authors concluded that the positive nature of the curriculum and the notion of exploring and talking about strengths prevented

resistance. Like Shulman's (1981) report for those soldiers in a US Army Post Stockade, Hamm et al. also observed that the positive energy gained in the group spilled outside the group through peer interactions (pp. 254–272).

Alizadeh et al. (2016) presented evidence that a core problem of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is underdevelopment of *social interest/social feeling* (p. 290). Sonuga-Barke et al. (2001) reported that a modified parenting program that focused on encouraging parental acceptance of and respect for ADHD children resulted in a significant reduction in ADHD symptoms (pp. 402–408).

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This carry over to others outside the group was also the case with the Adlerian group interventions reported here on young adults with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and associated comorbidities. The group interventions reported here likewise focused on a positive curriculum, namely, modern workplace best practices that brought group members together through common goals of best behavior in the workplace. However, this was not the only psychological movement active in the group. Participants reported experiencing a greater *social feeling*, identifying with others. They wanted to know themselves better, feeling a new ability to change things in their lives, along with subsequently observed greater emotional resilience and coping strategies (Eriksson 2018). These observations were endorsed by management and staff in the local provincial agency responsible for these young neurodiverse adults (Community Living North Halton, Ontario, Canada).

Adler's Holistic View on Increasing Social Feeling

According to Adler (1964), the value of an increased community feeling cannot be exaggerated:

The mind improves for intelligence is a communal function; the feeling of worth and value is heightened giving courage and a more optimistic view; it fosters a growth mindset as opposed to a fixed mindset; it favours devotion to one's work, objectivity, logic, and a readiness to take on responsibility; the individual feels at home in life and feels his existence to be worthwhile just so far as he is useful to others and is overcoming common, instead of private feelings of inferiority. (p. 155)

Adler (1964) gave one definition of *social interest/social feeling* as: "to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, and to feel with the heart of another" (p. 135). But he added that it means much more than feeling for a present community. Rather it is associated with striving for a form of community as though humankind had reached the goal of perfection, and so is associated with courage and independence (Ansbacher 1968, p. 146). With this psychological movement in themselves, therapists can help to engender in their clients a greater social feeling for others and a heightened self-esteem.

Adler's Recommendations for Therapists and Facilitators

Much as our body parts and organs are integrated to work together for the common good of the whole body, Adler sees human nature and nature more broadly connected as in a greater whole (Ansbacher 1968, pp. 131–149). In their great strivings to understand and describe life, nature, and the universe, the great scientists and artists discovered for themselves that we are part of the

harmony, coherence, and resonance found in matter and nature and illustrated by music (Woolfson 2015). The scientist's own initial feelings of connectedness and harmony result in a theoretical insight, whereas for the artist, the process leads to a sensually perceptual work of art, such as a painting, musical composition, or other artistic expression (Bohm 2004, p. 46; Eriksson 2017, p. 256). Adler recommends that therapists, counselors, and facilitators should be striving themselves to gain some very definite abilities for their job at hand: "To be a therapist, artistic ability is required, which cannot be achieved without mature self-understanding, ready wit, the ability to convince, being convinced oneself, and a sufficient ability to guess, to identify, and to co-operate" (Holub 1935, p. 87). Holub adds: "These are high requirements. But I believe that rather than to be frightened by them, it is better to consider them as part of an endless task whose solution we never reach, but which we can, however, gradually approach" (p. 87).

Leonardo da Vinci demonstrated to the world the importance of artistic ability in addition to scientific knowledge: "the artist sees what others only catch a glimpse of," and "learn how to see, realize that everything connects to everything else" (Greene 2015, pp. 11–12). Modern physics supports this latter comment (e.g., Gubser 2010, p. 25; Gelb 2004, p. 96). This has been the case facilitating these neurodiverse groups on workplace best practices reported here. It was helped along by the fact that the objective focus of the group on "workplace best practices" proved a positive and common objective and goal for all the participants and helped to forestall any resistance. It generated synergy and a teamwork approach to the course goals, and through interaction and discussion, to courage and a greater sense of belonging with new possibilities.

The evidence presented to the International Association of Counseling meeting in Rome (Eriksson 2018) suggests that when therapists and facilitators honestly and humbly join with discouraged or overwhelmed special needs clients as equals, and share with them their own weaknesses and imperfections and what they have found hard, at the same time that they are striving

to improve themselves and gain artistic ability, their clients will naturally be encouraged to see and experience themselves afresh, more objectively, and will feel encouraged and desirous of getting to know themselves better. This resonance in human nature provides a theoretical basis for Adler's concept of *social interest/social feeling* which he has also described as: "a cosmic feeling, a reflection of the coherence of everything cosmic, which lives in us and which gives us the ability to empathize with things which lie outside our body" (Ansbacher 1968, p. 134).

Striving after artistic ability and self-knowledge, therapists will be able to say with Alfred Lord Tennyson (2008), "I am part of all that I have met," and likewise concur with William Wordsworth (2008), "with an eye made quiet by the power of harmony and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things." Understanding that human nature and nature are connected through the same principles exhibited by music, therapists will appreciate Einstein's comment: "Look deep into nature, then you will understand everything better" (Eriksson 2017). Modern physics endorses this view and puts Adler's concept in line with modern string theory as well as the holographic theory of the universe (Bohm 2004, p. 43; Greene 2015, p. 482).

Eriksson (2017) has linked Adler's concept of *social interest/feeling connected* to the great scientists' and artists' own descriptions of their moments of originality. Creative originality may be understood as psychosocial well-being focused clearly by our goal-oriented creative power to increase our understanding or portrayal of something that passionately interests us. Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, like Adler, emphasized the importance of courage and not giving up: "One of the basic rules of the universe is that nothing is perfect. Perfection simply doesn't exist. Without imperfection, neither you nor I would exist," and, "however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do, and succeed at. It matters that you don't just give up" (Hawking 2018). It follows that creative originality must apply equally to the young neuro-diverse adults described here as it did with Stephen Hawking, since they also conform to nature and are not exceptions to it.

Conclusion

It is suggested here that the attitude of therapists to young neurodiverse adults should be the same as for everybody else namely: We would achieve more if we knew less about what is impossible (Wachtel 2013).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)
- ▶ [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Individual Psychology \(Adler\)](#)

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