THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ALFRED ADLER’S INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Alfred Adler’s individual psychology approaches the individual’s issues from an integrative-holistic perspective, emphasizing the social context in which s/he develops and lives. Adler’s psychology represents a solid scientific ground in coping with the contemporary world’s multiple issues, stressing the importance of developing community feeling, as a decisive factor in democratic social life and in individual mental health. The necessity of mutual acceptance and support, based on the social equality principle, represents a value and action-like framework indispensable to the improvement of the human condition. In Adler’s opinion, personality, as a complete and indivisible unity driven by goals, integrates the conscious and the unconscious in the so-called lifestyle dynamic construct, an important indicator of the psychosocial quality of individuality. The concept of God, as the ultimate human goal, constitutes an ideal to perfection, showing the way to be followed towards an ideal society. Endeavoring to unify with God, the individual will be able to defeat the constant inferiority feelings and imperfection, reaching self-achievement ‘on the useful side of life’. Emphasizing the significant role of religion in social life, individual psychology assumes that the main function of religion is to develop social community feeling, thus contributing to the development of humankind. The concepts of community feeling and social equality represent the very essence of the interconnection between Adler’s psychology and theology, especially with Pastoral theology. Self-development and community feeling positively influence each other, providing self-efficacy and a social life of high quality. Under these circumstances, the individual becomes able to cooperate with God and other people, contributing effectively to the improvement of human social life in a world deeply affected by globalization processes and a comprehensive crisis. Holistic theological practice can contribute to the productive compensation of inferiority feelings, driving the individual towards culture acts and pro-social behavior, to establishing a lifestyle characterized by a high spiritual level and thus getting closer to God.

Keywords: individual psychology, holistic perception, community feeling, human equality, spirituality

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1. Alfred Adler’s individual psychology – an integrative psychosocial approach to human issues

Alfred Adler (1870-1937), an illustrious representative of the Vienna school of psychoanalysis, is known as the first who, in the fields of Psychiatry and Psychology, drew attention to the decisive importance of social relations in the individual’s psycho-behavioral evolution and mental health, explaining psychological disorders by the realities of social life, marked by exaggerated competition and the fight for superiority.

After almost ten years of cooperation, Freud and Adler split, Adler giving up the presidency of the Psychoanalytic Society in 1912, when he founded the Society of Individual Psychology.

The concept of ‘individual psychology’ (Individualpsychologie, in German) can be misleading, since it does not suggest the social founding of the system put forward by Adler. Individual psychology does not mean the individual’s psychology taken in isolation. On the contrary, it is by excellence a social psychology which regards and understands the individual within the social context in which s/he lives and develops. Alongside the individual’s issues, the Adlerian psychology considers family, school education, religion, job, as well as relationships between social groups.

Adler underlines the importance of forming a cooperation ability between equal human beings of the same social value, believing that “in solving all issues related to life and human existence, the ability of social cooperation is essential; all issues should be solved within the structure of our human society, so that we would always consider mankind’s well-being” [1].

In this respect, education should prepare the youth for a desirable social behaviour, for constructive and productive relationships with life’s issues and challenges, so that the individuals would seek personal significance and self-achievement ‘on the useful side of life’. According to Adler, the so-called individual psychology is indeed social psychology [2].

By the word ‘individual’, Adler intended to emphasize the fact that his psychological approach aims at the psychology of the unique individuus person, which cannot be divided between contradictory components or forces, as in the Freudian approach (id, ego and superego) [3].

In the 1930s, Adler promoted his conceptions on the occasion of the numerous visits to the European countries and to the USA, where he finally settled and gave lectures at renowned universities. After his death which took place in 1937, many universities, Adlerian psychology societies and institutes developed this psychological movement which proved to be extremely human and optimistic.

The Adlerian psychology had a productive influence upon the development of great future psychological trends and theories which include the Adlerian principles and ideas in their scientific structure, such as: humanist psychology, ego psychology, the theory of cognitive dissonance, socialization theory, transactional analysis.
Moreover, According to Alexander Müller, Adler’s work constitutes itself as a philosophical anthropology which, similarly to a ‘magnetic centre’, can bring together the other subjects [4].

In the intellectual climate of the 1990s, following the change of scientific paradigm, Adler’s original and productive contribution to a better understanding of the human being and of his/her relations with the world was rediscovered. He created a wonderfully integrated and holistic theory of human nature and of psycho-pathology, a set of psycho-therapeutic principles and techniques, a vision of the world and human condition, a philosophy of life [5].

The present article starts from the premise that the basic principles of the Adlerian psychology, namely: community feeling, social equality, compensation and search for meaning in life developed on the useful side of life, can constitute themselves into a psychological foundation which adds value to theological thinking and practice, providing valuable reference points in coping with human issues.

Next, the article presents the importance of individual psychology from the viewpoint of the complex issues of contemporary world, emphasizing the practical aspects of Adler’s personality theory.

Then, the article focuses on the concept of God, analyzing it in close connection with the Adlerian concept of goal to perfection, more specifically with the function of religion in relation to the development of social community feeling. The central theme of the present paper is represented by the approach to Adler’s community feeling and human equality concepts, as functional premises for democratic social life and efficient theological practice. The compensation of community feeling and the search for meaning in life are analyzed within the context of lifestyle, which represents an integrative and value-like Adlerian concept.

2. The novelty of Adler’s psychology in the contemporary world

Traditional institutions, such as: family, School, and Church, have lost their role of mediating authentic values, in the circumstances of the comprehensive crisis manifest in the contemporary world. They have been replaced by public opinion which is shaped by the media, which mostly promotes the power of money, success and power as exclusive values [6].

According to Erik Blumenthal, we live in a discouraging society. Thus, parents discourage their children ever since their first five or six years. Then, going to school, the youth are exposed to new discouraging experiences, which continue up to a ‘superior level’ in the higher education institutions and generally throughout the entire social life. We think about the other as a competitor, a rival or even an enemy, instead of perceiving him as a force of equal value, with the same feeling of human dignity [7].
Owing to discouragement and growing resignation, the individual frequently experiences deep feelings of inferiority, showing incapacity and incompetence in coping with real life issues and adopting counterproductive ways of compensation, materialized in socially undesirable behaviours.

Such dissocial and anti-social behaviours are unavoidable, as long as society does not provide its members with the opportunity to experience the feeling of belonging to a community, real social equality, respect for human dignity and emotional warmth.

The Adlerian psychology approaches human issues from a social perspective, since people’s fundamental motivation is of a social nature, relying on the deep human need to belong to a group of people, to human society. In the Adlerian conception, a lot of contemporary issues, such as: delinquent behaviour, suicide, psychoses, violence or wars, are equally related to the fact that people still have difficulties in accepting others as a human beings of equal value, a lot of them experiencing the terribly frustrating feeling of not belonging to any human community.

Quite often, organized violence fulfils this emptiness by giving the individual the opportunity to find his/her place among the others, to gain personal significance within the group and to enjoy its support and psycho-emotional security. Focusing exclusively on the experience of ‘now and here’, some people experience a kind of false religious feelings, by acts of violence, destruction, terrorism, which represent in fact a negative destructive compensation of the inferiority complex, of incapacity and humiliation [8].

Nowadays, the job no longer represents a means of achieving identity and socio-professional appreciation, or a way to maintain stable psychosocial relationships. On the contrary, it constitutes a source of tensions, discouragement and dissatisfaction, negatively influencing family life and community.

Thus, the discouraged person feels uncertain with respect to his/her self-value and experiences disorders in his/her socio-professional identity. Consequently, (s)he will frequently have difficulties trying to integrate into family and social life, and will search for meaning in undesirable, counterproductive and even destructive or self-destructive ways, such as: isolation, depression, withdrawal from interaction, violent behaviour, consumption of alcohol and drugs, etc.

These issues occur and persist not because people no longer wish to live and work together, in cooperation. Rather, they are due to the fact that people are unable to communicate and live together as human beings of equal value, with respect for the dignity of the individual.

In the Adlerian perspective of the community feeling, all human beings are valuable and belong to the human community, being entitled to the same inalienable right of respecting the human dignity unconditionally, to be listened to and taken seriously, to gain respect and equal treatment. Thus, inequalities and inequities of different kinds represent violations of the “iron-clad logic of social living” [9].
Adler emphasized the necessity of mutual acceptance of both people and groups, mutual support according to the social equality principle, living together in authentic human communities [10].

Adler’s psychology is defined as a psychology of values, given the fact that it promotes authentic values which strengthen human solidarity and stimulates the individual’s creative power for the common well-being. Consequently, the psychology of values provides solutions to a great variety of social–human issues of the contemporary world, as well as real possibilities to improve the individual’s inner spiritual life, and to reestablish democratic social living [11].

Therefore, the main issue that people have to cope with today is how to live together on the same planet, integrating the past contributions with the present efforts in order to improve the human condition in the contemporary world and to provide a better life to the future generations.

The value-like integrative characteristic of individual psychology also lies in the fact that Adler’s principles can be successfully applied to all domains of social life and human relations: family life, school education, pastoral theology, job, psychotherapy, international relationships.

3. Characteristic features of Adler’s personality theory

Alfred Adler’s psychology as a value-oriented psychology perceives the human being in an optimistic and humanistic manner, deeming it capable of cooperation within an authentic social living, of self-improvement, self-development and self-achievement, as well as of effective contribution to the common well-being.

The central idea of human nature in Adler’s psychology is represented by the concept of the Social Human inextricably interconnected with others and with the entire nature [5].

According to Adler, personality is shaped not only by heredity and environment, but also by the individual’s capacity to interpret, influence and create the events of his/her own life. In other words, the inherited potential with which we were born is less practically important than what we do with it, than how we exploit this potential and our innate abilities. In this respect, individual psychology constitutes itself as a psychology of use and not as a psychology of possession.

According to Adler, heredity and environment provide only the framework and the influences to which the individual responds with his/her creative power, at the same time, restricting the individual’s capacity of choice and creativity [12].

In accordance with Freud’s conception, Adler believes that the first years have a decisive influence on personality development, due to the fact that the individual’s perception of his/her own past and the interpretation of his/her early life events is conclusive.
As opposed to Freud, Adler considers that the individual is mostly motivated by social reasons and less by sexual contents. Human behaviour is shaped by goals, having a teleological character, and the centre of personality lies in the conscious, not in the unconscious. The individuals chooses, decides, takes responsibility in his life development, searching for the life goal, makes efforts to gain personal meaning, success and a superior position in life.

Throughout his/her life, the individual is faced with alternatives, thus exploiting his/her cognitive and creative capabilities, and takes decisions as a free self-determined agent, in accordance with the personal goals included in his/her lifestyle.

The teleological conception of human behaviour differs essentially from the belief in which behaviour is ‘caused’ by certain internal or external forces, as well as by rewards and punishments. Thus, understanding the causes of certain behaviour is less important than understanding the goal towards which the person acts. The most important goal for the person as a social being is the goal to belong.

In Adler’s perception, the conscious and the unconscious are in the service of human personality, being used in the search of personal goals.

Adler’s personality theory is future-oriented, without denying or diminishing the importance of past experiences and influences. The individual takes decisions according to past experiences and to his/her present situation and lifestyle, choosing and agreeing on what is true in his/her case, on his/her behaviour and interpretation of events. This process does not exclude distortions and errors, being subjective by excellence. Yet, the individual’s social behaviour is shaped by systematic distortions, a fact proven by social psychology research.

Individual psychology as subjective psychology emphasizes the significant factors of behaviour, such as: values, beliefs, attitudes, goals, interests, reasons and the individual’s perception of reality. This ‘subjective reality’ incorporates the individual’s conclusions regarding the self, others and life.

Adler’s psychology approaches psycho-behavioural expressions from a cognitive perspective. Thus, the individual’s perception of life and the world is more important that the way they are in reality.

Another fundamental hypothesis of individual psychology is related to the indivisible, unique nature of personality, which can be understood and developed only as a complete holistic entity. Reaching maturity with his theory on human personality, Adler stresses that it has become universally accepted that all individual’s behaviours are uniquely structured, that the individual as an entity lives, dies and acts in close connection with his/her life’s issues [13].

According to this principle, the individual acts as an entity in which thoughts, feelings, actions, dreams, memories and even physiological states lead in the same direction. Personality is a system in which the whole is more and different from the sum of its constituents. This entity represents the indivisible unity of personality.
In order to understand the individual, to know his/her personality, we have to study individuality as a whole, and not in its isolated constituents. In this belief, cognitive activity, emotional states, attitudes, character, verbal and nonverbal behaviour are expressions of the unique personality, which reflect the individual’s plan of life.

The holistic psycho-behavioural perception of the individual indicates his/her necessity to find solutions to various life situations, which frequently differ a lot from each other. Thus, what is good and opportune in one situation can prove bad and inopportune in another, since this represents a totally different entity, valid only for that certain moment.

Another aspect of the holistic personality belief, both in social and theological practice, is to perceive the person as an integrated constituent of social life, emphasizing the inter-personal relationships more than the individual’s inner psycho-dynamics.

4. The concept of God and the goal to perfection

In many of his works, Adler made reference to religion and the concept of God. Approaching counselling and psycho-therapy from the viewpoints of religion and individual psychology, Adler shows that God is an idea to the psychologist, and a reality to the priest [14].

According to Adler, the wishes to reach God, to follow his calling and to unite with God are goals of the human endeavour to perfection, and not a drive or an instinct. This spiritual effort gives birth to appropriate thoughts, feelings and attitudes.

God can be recognized and is manifest both within a thinking process which aims at spiritual development and nobility, and also within some emotions through which they become positive feelings, as liberation from the inferiority feelings’ oppressive tension.

The concept of God and its immense significance to mankind can be better understood and appreciated from the viewpoint of individual psychology. According to this conception, the idea of God defines perfection in terms of which both the individual and society follow a spiritual goal concrete in the future, generating appropriate cognitive processes and emotional feelings.

In the integrative view of individual psychology, God has the role of indicating to the individual the way to be followed in his/her continuous endeavour to reach superior levels of spiritual development. Thus, God, as the individual’s ultimate goal, harmoniously completes this human labour for emotional nobility and perfection. Moreover, the idea of God represents to mankind a goal orienting towards an ideal society.

According to Alexander Müller, we do not possess a clear representation of the way to be followed towards our goal. Instead, we have to discover it, employing our cognitive and creative abilities. Therefore, we would have to choose how to act and our choice will strengthen or weaken our belonging to God, will draw us closer or farther from our true self-accomplishment and
spiritual achievement, not omitting personal responsibility [4]. Cooperation and peace will be lasting only by acknowledging our creative power, by deeply understanding our common origin and goal, which is the community feeling.

In ‘Social Interest: a Challenge to Mankind’, the synthesis of his entire work, Adler states that the concept of God is the ultimate representation of humanity’s ideal elevation, including the endeavour to perfection as an ultimate goal. Thus, God constitutes to man the goal of ideal perfection, a principle of perfection [13].

The search for perfection is a general human behavioural pattern, which can be productively accomplished in accordance with social community feeling, on the useful side of life, or, on the contrary, in a counterproductive way, on the useless side of life, by dominating others, escaping real life issues in order to avoid failure and defeat.

Individual psychology reinforces the universal goal towards perfection, emphasizing the importance of the direction in which we try to achieve this goal. For humankind, the most appropriate goal of perfection is represented by the social community feeling, as a feeling of human solidarity and as ‘the ultimate model of humanity’. It is an elevating goal, a normative aim which makes possible the creation of invaluable spiritual values of human culture, an authentic self-achievement and self-development of the individual.

At the individual level, this goal of perfection shapes the development of the individual’s entire personality, in his/her striving to become “a real fellow human” (ein richtiger Mitmensch) [13, p.201].

Human’s endeavour to gain strength and courage by following the divine goal has always stemmed from his/her constant inferiority feeling. Thus, the effort to achieve the goal of perfection and the irresistible attraction to it has always characterized human nature.

According to Adler, the most important step towards perfection is the human unification with God, as a defeat of everything bad and negative. The deep understanding of this interconnection and the religious feelings born as its consequence lay the foundation of religious belief.

5. The function of religion in Adler’s perspective

Rudolf Dreikurs, a close colleague of Adler’s, states that religion has stood for the most effective means to fulfil the individual’s spiritual needs throughout the history of mankind. The religious experience has provided humans with strong cohesion and belonging feelings, by elevating above the hardships of daily life and gaining a wider perspective on life [15].

As far as the social function of religion is concerned, it should be mentioned that throughout time religious prescriptions have significantly influenced the individual’s thoughts and actions.

In the view of individual psychology, the followers of different religions evaluate themselves by the efficiency with which their entire personality is manifest, and not only by the ways in which they express their feelings. Thus, it
is not only the verbalization of feelings that matters, but the quality of the entire behaviour, the desirable or undesirable character of the individual behaviour.

Adler’s psychology admits the great significance of religion which plays a decisive part in the life of society, by its church institutions or through the influences of school and education. According to Adler, the function of religion is to develop social community feeling, and individual psychology demonstrates in a systematic manner the achievement of the ultimate goal of human existence [1, p. 11].

In the Adlerian theory, any religion can be used either in a desirable or in an undesirable direction, encouraging the individual’s elevation or, on the contrary, his/her decay and social depreciation. Thus, it cannot be stated that one religion or the other is good or less good, since any great idea can be threatened by abusive use. That is why we should always consider the aim of using that religion.

Being an essential aspect of real life, religion can be approached by the individual either in a neurotic and counterproductive way or, on the contrary, in a non-neurotic, productive and healthy way, according to personal lifestyle [3].

Adler states that some people seek refuge in religion without altering their behaviour, convinced that God is in their service, taking full responsibility for what happens to them and thus he can be persuaded to do them favours. Through an undesirable manner of religious worship, the individual demands, pretends and expects without the slightest effort to improve his/her situation [10].

The fact that those who resist religion are quite many is not owing to religion’s essential nature. Instead, their existence can be explained by the contradictions which occur between the actions of the religious authorities and their essential nature, to which some abuses can also be added [14].

Religion gains an increasing importance in the circumstances of modern societies and globalization processes, which tend to turn the individual into an automatic being and an obedient consumer, and which promote tough competition, selfish individualism, as well as superiority – inferiority relations.

In our opinion, an authentic religious experience counteracts these tendencies and attitudes, creating the conditions which favour the development of social community feeling, and of human solidarity relying on the fundamental social need to belong.

In modern societies, autocratic relations were replaced by equity relations, due to the extension of the democratization processes, whereas God, as a symbol of ultimate power protecting the superiority or dominance of some individuals over the others, was no longer accepted [15].

Acknowledging the importance of his/her own values and human dignity, the individual revolted against religion organized on this structure and not against a religious experience in accordance with the natural human tendency towards democracy, as “a social interest in action” [16].

That is why Dreikurs pleads for ‘a religion for democracy’, noticing that ‘the epoch of democracy’ has to find its own religious expression, just like every cultural period which had its appropriate religion [15, 220].
In the democratic society, religion, and more exactly ‘democratic religion’ has to be humanistic, focusing on the individual who acknowledges his/her own values, his/her self-determination capacity and his/her creative force in the shaping of his/her own destiny.

In this context, the search for the truth has to follow an empirical direction, through which we can achieve only approximations of the truth, and not the absolute truth. Moreover, religion needs to put forward a new ethics whose values come into shape as a result of democracy. A change in behavioural standards will indicate a change in moral values. Therefore, personal ambition, virtue, strong feeling of duty, conformity, perfectionism and other similar qualities are no longer sufficient to motivate the individual to fully exploit his/her potential. On the contrary, these values become sources of failure and deficiency.

Being good and successful is no longer enough. Instead, we need to live in peace and harmony with ourselves and others, proving that we own different attitudes-values, such as: enthusiasm, benevolence, understanding, compassion, the sense of belonging, empathy, participation, social cooperation and, last, but not least, the courage to be imperfect.

The various forms of religion do not aim at driving people away from each other. By way of contrast, religion represents the individual’s link to God and also to other people. All evolved religions teach people to perceive the other as a brother, a human being of equal value, created by the same Creator. When religions wish alienation and intend to drive people away from each other, the individuals will practice religion in an undesirable and destructive way.

Religion reveals God to man and teaches the equality of all human beings. A truly religious man will respect the other’s devotion and faith, even when it is totally different from his. If this difference causes anxiety, nervousness or even hatred in the religious person, this fact is a serious issue of a psychological and not of a religious nature [4, p. 18].

The individual’s psychological inclinations and tendencies, such as: the endeavour to socio-emotional security, vanity and ambition, the thirst for power and superiority, are also present in the individual’s religious life.

6. Adler’s concept of community feeling and its relevance to theology

Community feeling has always been considered as the objects of religious teaching, all religions being shaped around the idea of social interest, expressed in the Biblical precept “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

In the contemporary world, a lot of people ask themselves “Why should I love my neighbour as myself? How would this serve my needs? Do people deserve to be loved?”, probably searching for a rational explanation of this attitude. This complex feeling should become natural, acting as a genuine corollary of life, preventing and treating pains and sufferings and leading humanity to a level on which community feeling, solidarity and human equity will no longer represent questions and doubts but daily life realities.
Theological aspects of Alfred Adler’s individual psychology

In the anthropological conception of Adler’s theory, community feeling (social feeling, social interest, social sense or in German Gemeinschaftsgefühl) constitutes the focal point in the theoretical and practical approach to human life, to mental health and to the psychosocial quality of the individual’s lifestyle.

In a holistic understanding, community feeling is no longer a mere feeling, but it becomes an evaluative attitude to life and human existence in its entirety, the fundamental psychosocial process through which the individual exploits his inner forces and thus reaches self-achievement [8, p. 96].

Community feeling develops as a consequence of the human being’s social need to belong to a social community which provides him/her with an identity and his/her quality of social being. This attitude involves thought processes, emotions and action-like behaviours related to the individual’s position in community and his/her significance in life, given the fact that every human being possesses an innate potential to develop this attitude for and with the community [17].

According to Dreikurs, the community feeling does not have a fixed rigid goal; instead, it aims at the individual’s attitude to life, at his wish to cooperate with others and to control life situations. From the viewpoint of social competence, the community feeling represents the expression of our cooperating and compromise-based understanding capacities [18].

The individual acknowledges and experiences the community feeling at certain levels. In the first place, at the emotional level, the community feeling is expressed by the deep need to belong to a community. The individual is able to empathize with others and to accept both the pleasant and the unpleasant aspects of life. In the second place, at the cognitive level, the individual can admit the necessity of interdependence with the others, realizing that individual well-being will depend on the common well-being. In the third place, at the behavioural level, these cognitive and emotional constituents turn into actions which aim at self-development and also at cooperation with the others.

Therefore, this concept comprises the plenary development of all the individual’s abilities, to which the admittance and acceptance of all human beings’ interconnection are added.

In Adler’s opinion, there is no fundamental conflict between self and society, between individuality and social relations, or between personal and social interest. Self-development and the development of the social feeling positively influence each other. Thus, if the self-development is efficient, the individual succeeds in establishing positive relationships with others. Moreover, if the ability to establish constructive inter-personal relationships is well developed, the individual will be able to employ that experience in his/her own development [19].

On the contrary, the deficiency or lack in community feeling leads the discouraged individual to the useless side of life, adopting a counterproductive and destructive lifestyle.
As a consequence, it can be stated that community feeling represents a significant indicator of the individual’s social adaptation and mental health, as well as a sign of human life together and democracy at the societal level. Thus, a well developed community feeling diminishes the individual’s level of inferiority feelings, alienation and isolation. On a social level, the community feeling sets the framework for a dignified life which is worth living.

Adler draws attention to the fact that exploiting the innate potential of community feeling requests group processes which can assist this development, such as: cooperation, mutual trust, respect for individual dignity, sharing responsibilities, taking common decisions as well as the individuals’ social equality [1, p. 10].

According to Allan Savage, Adler’s concept of community feeling can be successfully integrated in Pastoral theology as a theology of religious practice. It has a special significance in the development of religious thinking and it establishes a scientific foundation for a holistic pastoral practice [20].

Therefore, holistic pastoral psychology creates a more efficient pastoral practice by overcoming the theoretical approach. The growth of community feeling by participating in life and not by contemplating it is in accordance with the aim of Pastoral theology, which is to understand and solve life’s issues from a Christian perspective, with the purpose of improving the individual and society’s condition.

Studying the individuality as an indivisible entity in the context of social relationships, Adler’s psychology provides a scientific ground which is extremely valuable to the Christian understanding of community and to the search for Christian perfection. In this optimistic approach, the individual is capable of cooperation with God and the other people, aiming to institute the contemporary democratic community.

7. Functional social equality – a challenge to human living together

Achieving human social equality represents a sine qua non premise of assuring the active characteristic of community feeling, and of democratic living together. According to Dreikurs, functional interpersonal equality means that each and every individual is entitled to decide on his/her own actions, on self-determination. Social equality does not imply the uniformity of human beings; on the contrary, it recognizes the fact that people are unique individualities, with an unmistakable and infinite inner worth, having the same universal right to be treated with respect and dignity [15, p.XIII].

In Adler’s opinion, equality is the iron-clad logic of social living, which blesses those who follow it and punishes those who fight it or ignore it. People will develop their cooperation capacity and community feeling only if they acknowledge the fact that despite existing individual differences, they are not essentially different from the others, having an equal value on a social level as equal human beings, with the same fundamental need to belong [18, p. 5].
Social living assumes the existence of interpersonal relationships based on the principle of human equality and mutual respect, as a solid psychosocial foundation which improves the human condition in a world of anxiety, fear and discouragement.

Functional social equality allows the individual to act as a free agent, responsible for his/her own deeds and for the social sphere in which s/he acts, no longer being a dependant or a victim, but the competent shaper of his/her own destiny.

Still, in social practice, the social equality principle and the socially equivalent status are rarely recognized and applied, owing to the individual’s fear to reach an inferior position in this way. Thus, the fear of getting an inferior value prevents the individual from admitting that others have the same value, trying instead to prove his/her superiority over them.

Individual psychology approaches the equality of people from an axiological and psychosocial viewpoint, the concept of equality gaining significance only in a social context. An authentic experiencing of equal value of other human beings, which represents the practical achievement of social equality, is impeded by two major obstacles that act in close interdependence, namely social inferiority feeling and a competitive climate. In order to compensate an overwhelming feeling of social inferiority, the individual frequently chooses competition. Wishing to achieve the desired social status, s/he will attempt to become superior by domination.

In the contemporary world which promotes a system based on competition and social dominance, many people experience social inferiority feelings, not being acquainted with the democratic practice of social equality. Living the social inferiority, together with a low level of self-esteem, prevent the individual from participating in community life and from making a contribution to its well-being.

Applying the human equality principle and treating all human beings as having an equal and infinite inner value remain challenges to all societies that want to become authentically democratic, in spite of the inexistence of a real social equality-based society.

In this respect, we state that theological practice can effectively contribute to redirecting values from competition to cooperation, from fear to courage, from a vertical psychosocial dynamics to a horizontal dynamics, to equivalent interpersonal relationships.

This contribution is carried out by encouraging the application of the social equality principle to different spheres of social life, such as: marriage, family education, school education, job and psychotherapeutic processes. All these psycho-social contexts can constitute ‘laboratories of social equality’ in which the dominant interactive pattern would be cooperation, providing thought and action-like experiences relying on a common set of values and principles and avoiding superiority – inferiority or domination relationships.
The development of the social equality feeling and the cooperation capacity represents an essential condition for an effective psycho-hygiene and psycho-prophylaxis, restraining stress, neurotic states and deviant behaviours by psychical unblocking, encouraging pro-sociality and impeding certain destructive feelings, such as: hatred, envy, sectarianism, fundamentalism and fanaticism.

8. The inferiority feelings and their compensation

In individual psychology, the inferiority feelings are generated by negative psychodynamics, representing erroneous self-evaluations and being manifested in a low self-value, the individual experiencing less or more intensely imperfection, weakness, deficiency, incertitude, frustration.

Inferiority feelings are generally human, universal, occurring in the personality development process and can be perceived as normal, natural, belonging to human nature. The biological and social inferiority feelings can be defeated and even exploited by the individual if s/he employs his/her self-creative power, producing culture acts during the self-achievement and adapting process. According to Adler, our entire human culture is based on inferiority feelings [1, p. 55].

A series of negative feelings occurring in concrete life situations, such as anxiety, sadness, despair, shame, fear, blocking, disgust, ‘enrich’ our emotional life and can become a considerable force, able to defeat our own person and overcome life’s hardships, stimulating psychical development.

The intensity of the inferiority feelings depends on the individual’s interpretation, on his/her interpretation of his/her self-value, as compared with the others. As an unpleasant experience of imperfection, these feelings are usually hidden, concealed by the individual in his/her wish to avoid failure and humiliation.

Overcoming the inferiority feelings as a minus situation by striving for superiority, together with the endeavour towards a plus situation, constitute natural life components, giving the psychological premises which are indispensable for human development [12, p. 117].

From this optimistic viewpoint, the inferiority feelings are not abnormal or pathological in themselves. Instead, they represent a challenge, a chance, even a propulsive force which motivates the individual in the direction of productive self-achievement.

By way of contrast, E. D. Ferguson states that the inferiority feelings can be a driving force mobilizing a large variety of deviant and anti-social behaviour. Thus, the individual acts against the community or against his/her own self [17, p. 12].

Rudolf Dreikurs draws attention to the fact that neither the absence nor the presence of inferiority feelings can constitute a reliable indicator of the individual’s psychosocial value. In this respect, many extremely valuable people with remarkable success suffer from deep inferiority feelings, whereas many
mentally-disabled people or persons with severe psychical disorders show no trace of inferiority feelings [18].

In Adler’s opinion the inferiority feelings are considered ‘erroneous feelings’ or even ‘a prejudice against our own self’, which are born in a relational environment that promotes their occurrence and perpetuation, based on the wrong self-evaluation. Therefore, the common underestimation of our own self constitutes both the cause and the consequence of inferiority feelings, which can become more intense and more comprehensive.

In a climate characterized by cooperation and interpersonal equality, in which competition and vertical ambition are reduced to the desirable limits, inferiority feelings would not be inevitable. Instead, the need to belong, prosociality, the development of values and personal meaning would take priority in an encouraging psychosocial context [8, p. 16].

As far as the origin of the inferiority feelings is concerned, we should mention the fact that their occurrence is always preceded by a confrontation, a comparison between the own self and the surrounding people and objects, firstly with the home’s physical reality and with the other family members, secondly with all the people we meet throughout our lives, and then with all earthly realities and the immensity of the Universe.

The individual who doubts his/her own values and forces always overestimates the others’ capacities, life’s hardships and nature’s threats, giving them imaginary, fictitious features and dimensions. Thus, we form an inner world of meanings and understanding, a subjective psychological reality and we act more according to our convictions and attitudes and less in conformity with the objective reality’s data. Moreover, what happens in reality becomes less important than our perception about it.

Dreikurs distinguishes between three main types of inferiority feelings, whose creative employment have a major influence on the progress of humanity. The first two types of inferiority feelings concern humanity in its entirety, encouraging people to create and diversify their culture, whereas the third type affects the individual.

Biological inferiority feelings have lead to the establishment of human groups and to the development of intellectual capacities. As a consequence, man has become the master of nature, in spite of initially being its helpless victim. In time, the individual ‘enriched’ with the cosmic inferiority feeling, acknowledging his/her humbleness in the universe and coming to understand the limits of his/her earthly living by death, his/her inevitable disappearance. People have searched for and found extremely valuable compensations in religion, philosophy and arts, aiming to eternity and perfection, to an alliance with the supreme transcendental being.

Social inferiority feeling affects the individual probably in the most painful way, owing to the fact that it drives the individual away from the community, turns him/her against others, makes him/her seek revenge for his/her inferior position. This type of inferiority feeling has negative repercussions on the development of community feeling and implicitly on the individual’s mental
health, given the promotion of competition and superiority – inferiority feelings in society. Thus, no one can develop his/her need to belong and personality if s/he feels despised, rejected, left aside or pushed into an inferior position.

H.L. Ansbacher and R.R. Ansbacher distinguish between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ inferiority feelings. Unlike the normal inferiority feeling which occurs as a psychological issue characteristic to the development of individuality, the abnormal inferiority feeling is mostly present with the people displaying organic deficiencies or disabilities. These people develop insufficiency, dependence and incompetence feelings which are more visible than with normal, able people [12, p. 118].

The pathological form of the inferiority feelings is represented by the so-called inferiority complex which means ‘a dead end’ to any psychological development if it is lived subjectively as a depressing and paralyzing inability or incapacity feeling. Having the deep conviction that s/he lacks any personal value, the individual no longer hides his/her deficiencies and imperfection. Instead, s/he openly proves the inefficiency, lack or ‘illness’, isolating him/herself from life’s realities, from any common activity and inter-human relationships.

According to Adler, the inferiority complex, as a permanent manifestation of the consequences of inferiority feelings, together with the insistence on this feeling, can be explained by the great deficiencies in social community feeling [13]. Whereas inferiority feelings lead to different forms of compensation, aiming to surmount these negative emotions, the inferiority complex represents a passive position, resigning any effort, the individual’s isolation into a depressive state, admitting total defeat.

Yet, in our opinion, the inferiority complex is not a fatality, ‘an incurable disease’. On the contrary, it can be defeated if the inferiority feelings which generate it are productively reshaped within a positive compensating effort, which would be encouraged systematically. As H.L. Ansbacher and R.R. Ansbacher state, subduing and defeating the feelings of inferiority, as a striving for superiority and search for significance, constitute an intrinsic necessity of life itself [12].

Inferiority feelings are a form of stimulation for compensation, as a strong ascending impulse, of elevation from an inferior position which is disadvantaging, unfavourable or ‘minus’ to a superior position, more advantageous, favourable, ‘a plus’.

In this respect, the individual in a position of inferiority perceives his/her own self as dependent, unable, weak, inferior, helpless, isolated, shy, anxious, uncertain, inappropriate, disadvantaged, doubting, imperfect, unimportant, value-less. By way of contrast, the person in a position of superiority is independent, strong, superior, able, appropriate, competent, self-assured, perfect, important, valuable, courageous, determined.
In this compensating psychodynamics from ‘minus’ to ‘plus’, the subjective perception of the situation plays the most important part. Subjective perception involves approaching things, phenomena and people from an individual point of view and from one’s own framework, adopting one’s own ‘cognitive map’ of the world [21].

In this compensating effort, the individual can reach useful, even exceptional achievements, by a productive compensation in particular domains. For instance, courage and taking responsibility lead to an efficient pro-social lifestyle, characterized by balance and mental health.

The compensating effort and the striving for superiority characterizes all human beings, being present both in the psychological life of ‘normal’ healthy people, and in that of the disabled or mentally disordered ones. Moreover, this compensating effort takes place on the physical level, as well as on the psychological level, in a holistic unity which provides self-efficiency and achievement of inner harmony [22].

Adler states that ‘the search for compensating’ inferiority feelings can leave reality, evolving on ‘the useless side of life’, in the world of fiction, ideal images and unreal wishes, leading to an inefficient, counterproductive and neurotic lifestyle [12, p. 255].

Overcompensation, which generates the so-called complex of superiority over people and environment, is manifested in the pathological search for power, pursuit of imaginary success, faith in own supra-human capacities, extremely deficient community feeling, cooperation incapacity, and deviant behaviours justified by private logic. Such manifestations of overcompensation are included in the ‘useless side of life’, endangering both the individual’s mental health and community well-being.

Inferiority feelings can be overcompensated on the ‘useful side of life’ as well, leading to outstanding performance, acts of culture or scientific results.

Overcompensation is a result of the inferiority feelings’ stimulating intermediation, which can follow an extremely complex route. Therefore, inferiority in a certain field is overcompensated in a completely different domain, for example physical inferiority can be overcompensated by extremely high intellectual, scientific or artistic performance.

The Adlerian conception related to the striving for superiority and personal significance is compatible with G. Allport’s growth theory [23], with C. Roger’s development drive [24], with R. White’s competence theory [25], with the theory of self-achievement put forward by A. Maslow [26] and the model of search for meaning, advanced by V.E. Frankl [27].
9. **Lifestyle and the search for meaning**

According to Adler, lifestyle represents the individual’s personal way of perceiving, understanding and coping with life’s issues, of achieving his/her personal aims by specific behaviours. In his definition, lifestyle constitutes the individual’s ‘whole attitude to life’, characteristic for his/her own self [2].

According to H.H. Mosak, lifestyle represents ‘the cognitive map’ which helps the individual to adopt the specific operations which enable him to cope with life tasks. This cognitive framework is made up by a set of concepts and beliefs related to our self and to the world in which we live, being a specific indisputable modus vivendi [28].

In B. H. Schulman’s interpretation, lifestyle illustrates the individual’s ‘golden rule’, not a mere collection of rules, but the organizing of all the rules in a cognitive behavioural pattern or plan [29].

Actually, lifestyle constitutes a means to defeat inferiority feelings, and, at the same time, the individual’s life strategy in his/her search for personal meaning. Lifestyle cannot be separated or detached from the person, since it expresses the psychological unity, aiming at the indivisible personality [30].

Lifestyle, as a total life attitude, is used by people to filter the inputs and the specific answering reactions, to interpret the surrounding world, to draw conclusions and to make decisions related to our own self and life. As a dynamic construct consistent with the self, lifestyle represents an omnipresent psychological reality, which integrates the conscious and the unconscious, the verbal and the non-verbal, the cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes.

Lifestyle shapes itself in early childhood until the age of 6 or 7, but it stays functional throughout adulthood, influencing the individual’s way of action and his/her relationships. Lifestyle becomes fixed at the adult age, being consistent with the self and very resistant to change. Still, significant changes in a desirable direction can be achieved, encouraging the search for constructive goals that are in accordance with the existing realities of lifestyle.

In lifestyle’s psychodynamics, the manner in which characteristic inferiority feelings can be compensated is essential, whereas their presence or absence is less important. Biological or social inferiority feelings can be defeated, compensated either in a positive direction, on the useful side of life or in a negative direction, on the useless side of life.

If the individual trusts his/her own values and forces and also takes courage towards life’s issues, the positive compensation leads to a constructive, productive and healthy lifestyle. This lifestyle is characterized by a high level of community feeling and also by the individual’s sustained efforts to self-development and self-improvement.

By way of contrast, if discouragement and lack of trust in one’s self and life are intense, the compensation of inferiority feelings will follow a negative dynamics. It will result in a counterproductive, inefficient, unhealthy, neurotic lifestyle characterized by a low level of community feeling, dissocial attitudes, dissatisfaction and exaggerated self-protection.
The individual is free to choose the direction in which the compensating effort and the lifestyle’s social orientation will develop. Thus, the power to choose the direction of the compensating process and the lifestyle establishment represent a strong inner force which the individual can employ in order to achieve peace and internal harmony and lead a happy and productive life.

Christian lifestyle development assumes the cultivation of community feeling, which makes possible the successful solving of major life issues. In the circumstances of appropriate mental health, according to Adler, the human is confronted with three main life tasks, namely: work and vocation, society and friendships, sex and love [1, p. 239].

Dreikurs and Mosak have extended this set of major life tasks with two additional tasks, namely getting along with oneself and finding a meaning in life, in other words a relationship with the universe, with the transcendental, as a task which is spiritual by excellence [31].

This spiritual life task involves the search for life’s meaning, for the signification of human existence. Moreover, it implies in a Christian context, the concept of God and the individual’s relationship with God and Jesus, the purpose and meaning of sufferance and sacrifice, as well as the issues of death and immortality.

In E. Blumenthal’s opinion, the individual becomes a personality only by a spiritualization effort, surpassing the psychological level of egocentricity. In this respect, ‘the spiritualization’ represents the process or the way which leads us from egocentricity to spirituality [7].

Despite the extraordinary results achieved in the scientific and technological fields, our spiritual development is still at the beginning, given the fact that we are separated by only 67 generations from the time in which Jesus lived. Therefore, we cannot expect our spiritual level to significantly improve during the short period of a generation. On the contrary, we need to be patient and perseverant, in the circumstances of the contemporary world which promotes excessive consumption, preference for material values, selfish individualism, careerism, the wish to win at any cost, to dominate over the others, and excludes humanistic values and everything spiritual, intuitive or mysterious [11].

The individual with an egocentric lifestyle thinks in superiority - inferiority terms, acts impulsively and furiously, lives in the past, searches for causes, excuses and pretexts, and adopts a pessimistic attitude.

By way of contrast, the spiritual, religious lifestyle is characterized by a high level of community feeling and love of God, living in the present and future orientation. The individual who has adopted this lifestyle has set and followed productive personal goals, living in harmony with others, being capable of loving them as human beings of equal value and refusing their undesirable actions.
Moreover, the religious person who is spiritually developed acts with the purpose of helping the others and becomes more and more capable of good deeds, making fewer mistakes. In his/her effort, this person becomes increasingly better and closer to God. S/he believes in life, in others, in society and also in the own self, achieving inner freedom and more obvious spiritual development.

The individual’s spiritual change means searching for the transcendental goal of getting to know God, of loving Him and believing in Him, as well as establishing human equality relationships, cooperation, personal responsibility and co-responsibility, altruism.

10. Final considerations

Alfred Adler’s individual psychology, as an integrative-holistic social psychology, provides valuable and action-like landmarks which prove to be extremely useful in improvement of the human condition, under the circumstances of the contemporary world which is severely affected by the globalization processes and by comprehensive crisis [8].

Adler’s ideas have had a productive influence on the development of subsequent psychological theories, anticipating a psychosocial perspective on understanding human nature and behaviour. Even nowadays, they positively affect the preoccupations which aim to improve the individual’s mental health and social integration.

The concept of a social human being interconnected with others, with the entire nature and with God adds a psychosocial principle to theological thinking and practice, which is able to improve the efficiency of this approach, by promoting a holistic perspective on life and human issues [20].

The optimism and future orientation of Adler’s theory, the exploitation of the individual’s creative force and the compensation of inferiority feelings ‘on the useful side of life’ create a psychological framework which encourages the development of democratic and religious personality structures.

As a principle of perfection and goal for humanity, God can be known and followed through a permanent spiritual effort, as a life task which aims at finding meaning in human life [4].

Together with the fundamental human needs to belong and social equality, the concept of community feeling represents the connection between Adler’s anthropological conception and theological thinking and practice, approaching human issues within the framework of an integrative culture science.

As a value-like approach to human nature which is extremely anchored in life’s psychosocial realities, Adler’s psychology indicates from an encouraging perspective the value landmarks towards an ideal society, characterized by community feeling, human solidarity, social equality and a high spiritual level.
Theological aspects of Alfred Adler’s individual psychology

The systematic development and employment of community feeling and social cooperation in daily life, as well as the implementation in social practice of the interpersonal equality democratic principle constitutes a challenge for the contemporary world. Furthermore, the consistent respect for human dignity which relies on admitting the equal and infinite value of all human beings requires common efforts based on an authentically humanistic set of values.

In this respect, employing the individual’s hidden human potential and encouraging his/her creative force, in cooperation with God and other human beings, are extremely necessary, with the purpose to provide the individual’s inner harmony and a democratic social life of all human beings.

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References


