

BASIC CONCEPTS OF ADLERIAN THEORY

for students of Adlerian
psychotherapy and counseling

Zivit Abramson

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Translation: Mia Levitt

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This booklet is based on the work of the founding fathers, Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs, as well as my teachers, Achi Yotam and Mika Katz, and some of mine...

Introduction

During their first year of studies at the *Israel Adler School of Psychotherapy* I meet with the students, when their knowledge of Adlerian theory is limited. Therefore, I review the basic central concepts of the theory with them and for them, particularly in the context of therapy or counseling. The following pages are my attempt to present the basic concepts in a structured and organized manner. It is intended to help students understand these concepts, see them in a wide, deep context and sometimes in their philosophical context. Also, I hope students will internalize these basic concepts and implement them in their work as therapists and in their personal lives. Thus, it is pointless to attempt to find in Adler's writings the categorizations, the specific definitions or the connections I have made. For example, Adler did not "divide inferiority feelings into categories," as some students mistakenly thought when I presented the division. Adler wrote about inferiority feelings in various contexts and meanings, and I try to help students not to feel confused when reading about inferiority feelings, which sometimes appear as positive and normal, and at other times as negative and harmful. It is this kind of unclear issues that I try to make clear. I hope the material in this booklet will benefit all of you looking for an initial introduction to the theory of Alfred Adler and his successor Rudolf Dreikurs, as well as his successor Achi Yotam.

Zivit Abramson
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Freedom of (self)-choice and its limitations

We begin with one of Adler's greatest ideas—an idea which holds much hope, optimism, and many possibilities—the idea of freedom of self-choice. This is one of the most important ideas you will want to share with your clients. Adler used to say, “Everything can be different.” What exactly did he mean by everything? We will answer this question shortly.

Adler brings us the idea of freedom—the freedom of choice we have as humans. This freedom is a philosophical (metaphysical) assumption, which can be found in the writings of other philosophers, particularly those of Jean Paul Sartre (In my doctoral dissertation, I pointed out the amazing similarities between him and Adler (Abramson, 2012)). The assumption of freedom is inseparable from the assumption of personal responsibility, and this may very well be one of the reasons why Adler is less popular than creators of other theories, particularly Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalysis.

Until Freud came along, the most common way to relieve the individual of responsibility was by using God: “Things happen to me because it is God's will,” or, “I am doing this or that as God ordered me to do so.”

Nietzsche declared the “death of God” in the 19th century. It means that we can no longer continue to use this concept, idea, or image of God as the one who decides everything for us. We are the ones who make the choices. This was a harsh message. Towards the end of the century, Freud came on the scene and proposed a different possibility for realizing the desire to relieve ourselves of responsibility: the subconscious, the unconscious, urges and instincts. All of these enabled the individual to celebrate freedom from responsibility. “I don't know why I did this or why I said that; it just happened. Something made me do it; it probably came from my subconscious.” Adler, on the other hand, said, “No, it did not ‘happen.’ It is you. You chose to do this or to say that or to act in a specific way.”

Before you become angry and resistant to this great responsibility that you now find bestowed upon you, I should tell you that when we talk about freedom of choice according to Adler, the intention is *freedom of choice within several limitations* that largely narrow it down.

The first limitation

The first limitation of freedom of choice is that we have freedom of choice *only in as far as it concerns us*. This is why Achi Yotam did not call it ‘freedom of choice,’ the way we used to, but rather ‘freedom of self-choice.’ To the dismay and disappointment of many of us, we do not have freedom of choice outside of ourselves. In particular, we cannot make choices regarding what another person or other people do.

Related to this point, we find a common universal mistake, one which we will often find with our clients. If you look carefully at people's behaviors and at what they say, you will find we all tend to assume we have freedom of choice regarding the actions of others, and that we express ourselves as if this were so: “I do not want you to talk like that.” It's true, we have the freedom to decide that we will *say* such a sentence, but that does not mean we have the freedom to decide if the other will talk like that or not. On

the other hand, we will always find how little awareness individuals have about their freedom of choice in regard to their own actions. Instead, we hear: “I can't help it.” The ability to make this distinction—of what is under my control and what is not—is crucial both for the individual’s wellbeing and for human relationships.

We often believe, for example, that we have the possibility to choose our children's behavior. This is one of the areas in which this mistaken belief is most prominent. The truth of the matter is that we can tell our children what behavior we believe is preferable and which behavior we consider unsuitable, we can adopt certain educational methods and hope that they will act according to our wishes, but when a child does what we want him or her to do, it is not because we decided they will do so but because they themselves chose to obey our wishes.

I am repeating this to make a point—the distinction between freedom of self-choice and the freedom of choice regarding another person is, as I said, one of the most important and central distinctions in human relationships. We all tend to get confused. We do not admit that we have responsibility for our own behavior; yet, we invest much energy “choosing” the behavior we wish to find in other people. One of our goals in Adlerian therapy is to put it in front of the client: Do you want something to change in your situation? If so, let us focus on what *you yourself* can do to bring about this change you desire.

Of course, there may be many cases in which we have no ability to change the situation. We are then faced with an undesirable situation. Still, the choice is in our hands; what do we choose to do about this “undesirable situation,” as Talma Bar-Av called it in her book *Touching Life* (Bar Av, 1992). What is our reaction going to be? How will we live with this undesirable reality? Unchangeable situations and “givens” are present in our lives from the day we are born. These include our family of origin, our parents (so many of us would like to be able to change them!), our siblings, our position in the birth order, the era in which we were born, the geographical location in which our family lives, our family's socio-economic status, our physical structure, our body and our face (yes, there is the option to choose plastic surgery, but only to a certain extent), our IQ level, our genetic disposition for illness or health, and the date of our death¹. All of these are given data, and we have the freedom of choice to decide what we do about them. Do we fight them? Do we feel sorry for ourselves? Do we accept them and focus on the positive aspects present? Do we search for a solution?

This, then, is the first limitation of the freedom of choice: it is relevant *only to what we ourselves can do*. The term “doing” includes any cognitive, emotional, or actual action.

¹ *There is another innate “given” which does not leave us humans the freedom of choice. The origin of the idea lies in philosophy, and I will not go into detail. I will only say this: Jean Paul Sartre said, “Man is condemned to be free”, (1955, p. 34). This means that we were born free, and that we cannot make the choice not to be free. In our clinical work, we come across clients who choose to believe that they are not free. This choice is particularly prevalent among individuals whose lifestyle leans towards victimization and martyrdom and also among those who do not fulfill the basic life tasks.*

The second limitation

The second limitation of the freedom of choice is the question of *does the person know or does not know* that there are alternatives. (Note: We are not talking about self-awareness here; we are using the term “know” in the simple and concrete sense.) Imagine a person who wants to exit a room. He knows of one door. He will probably use this door every time he wishes to leave the room. In fact—and this is the Adlerian claim—he has many options because the curtains on the side of the room hide many other doors. Sometimes there are not many but there are always at least a few. The number of options available differs from situation to situation. True, there are situations in which options are extremely limited. An extreme example would be a person about to be executed. Though he, too, has options. He can cry and beg for his life, curse the executioner, request forgiveness, plan a last minute escape (this happens sometimes in movies), quietly accept his fate, or proudly shout out the idea he has fought for, “And yet it moves!” as Galileo Galilei did (at least according to Berthold Brecht). This is an example of a situation in which there is only a small number of possibilities. Yet (claims Adler), there is always more than one, and often the number of “doors” or possibilities is identical to the number of people utilizing their creativity to find a solution for a problem.

However, when the individual does not *know* of the existence of other doors, he will not look for them. He believes there is just one exit. When he wants to leave the room, he always leaves through the one door he is aware of. Now we ask: does he have the freedom to choose which way he will exit the room, or does he not? To answer this question, we can say this: on an existential, ontological level—from the point of view of truth—he has many options for exiting the room (as there are many doors), but he does not have access to all of these options because he does not know that they exist. If we choose to use the term “there is” as signifying what exists in reality, then we might say that one always *has* freedom of choice. This is what Adler meant when he said: “everything can be different.” But, if we focus on a specific individual, we may say that he has no freedom of choice as he has no real option of choosing what there is, since he is unaware of it.

This is one of the reasons why we never (!) blame our patient for his unhealthy, irrational behavior, which continues to make things difficult for him. We might say to a woman who gives in to all of her abusive husband’s demands, “You don’t have to give in to him,” but if she does not see this option then, from her subjective point of view, this possibility does not in fact exist.

In cases where the problem is “not knowing” there are alternatives, we simply need to bring the alternative option to the patient’s attention. The alternative option may create a sense of relief, or even solve a problem. If this is the case, the patients will be pleased to hear the solution. They will say, “How come I did not think of this before?” And they will proceed to do what we have suggested. For example, a woman who has never lived alone (as soon as she left her parents’ home, she moved-in with her husband) claims that she wants to leave her husband but says, “I cannot leave my husband. I don’t know how it is done. I do not know where I could go.” Her therapist gives her these directions: “You get a job, you make money, you contact a real estate agent who will help you find an apartment, and then you move out and into your new apartment.” She was happy with the suggestion, did what was suggested, and immediately felt a sense of relief. We may call this consulting. This would be the easy case. For

most clients, however, a practical suggestion will not be sufficient because there is another limitation to their freedom of choice.

The third limitation

For whatever we choose to do, we pay a price. It is usually a refusal to pay the price that keeps us from changing direction. Let us suppose that the woman we spoke about believes that if she leaves her husband he will become very angry with her; maybe he will hit her or even kill her. As she is not willing to pay this price, she does not see the option of refraining from being submissive or of leaving him. This is how her freedom of choice is limited.

Often what people are looking for when they come to us for therapy is a new way to cope with their difficulties, a way to cope that has no price attached. Even as Adler contended we have freedom of self-choice regarding our thoughts, feelings, and actions, he never promised that there are choices that will lead to perfect happiness. Or, to put it differently, personal freedom to change one's behavior requires the willingness to pay the price of the new choice, and also to give up the benefits that came with the old choice.

Every choice is determined by us through balancing costs and benefits. Here, we come across one of the most difficult and sad characteristics of us human beings, or at least of those of us who are not Adlerian. Our awareness of the *prices* we pay for choices is always greater than our awareness of the *benefits*. Otherwise, we would experience more moments of happiness, joy, and pleasure. When we are short of breath, we are very much aware of it, and jealous of those who breathe with ease. Yet when we breathe easily, we are rarely aware of it, and we rarely enjoy it. The same goes for our behavior. We come to therapy because of the price we are paying for our choices (a price we are very aware of), but we are usually not aware of the benefits we gain from those same choices. For example, a woman in therapy may complain that her husband is never home. As a result, he is not involved with their children and does not help with chores around the house. In this way, she pays a price for her husband's absence. On the other hand, she is unaware of the ways in which she benefits from his absence. Namely, she has full control of everything that happens in her household, particularly with regards to the children. It's likely that once she is aware of this, she will feel reluctant to give up this control. In a situation like this, wherein a therapist reflects the trade-offs involved in solving our problems, we are often reluctant to change.

Prices are different from situation to situation. They vary from light to heavy. A relatively light price to pay (though never for he who is paying, who believes that he cannot pay such a price) is, for example, entering into a conflict. In the same case of the woman afraid to rebel against her husband, she may know that the price she will have to pay for rebelling will be her husband's anger, or a quarrel with him. This may be a price she is willing to pay. In other cases, the price is heavy (beating), or even very heavy—at the end of the continuum is the possibility that the price will be death. For example, when the same woman has reason to believe that if she leaves him, her husband will kill her. Another example for the possibility that the price will be death is when someone chooses to join an underground movement in resistance to an oppressive conqueror or leader. The extent of the price differs from situation to situation and often limits the subjective possibility of an individual to make a different choice.

But none of these examples represent the principal price people are afraid to pay. Above all, the loss of the feeling of self-worth is the price that clients fear they will have to pay for change. This is the main fear which explains the clients' refusal to make new choices and the difficulty they experience in changing their self-choice. Why would someone believe that changing behavior will lead to the loss of his value? This question brings us to the principal limitation of the freedom of self-choice.

The principal limitation: Lifestyle (which includes basic mistakes)

The principal limitation to freedom of choice is one's lifestyle. At the core of the lifestyle, we find the individual's personal way of achieving a sense of value and belonging. According to Adler, full freedom of choice exists until the age of five and at a lesser degree until the age of ten. Beyond this age, the child who will become an adult has already formalized a lifestyle, which is the biggest limitation to freedom of choice.

From now on, we are talking about a limited degree of freedom of choice, largely *unknown* to the individual (limitation number two). Yet even when we inform the patient of the existence of free self-choice, even when we tell him there are, in fact, possible alternatives to the way he has functioned up until now, the question of the price still remains (limitation number three).

If he is a 'Verticalist'², the patient mistakenly believes that *only* when a certain condition he himself created is present (for example, only when everyone loves him), only then will he have value. This is a mistake because we all have value. We all matter. We all belong. The behavior of an individual who has a vertical worldview is always directed towards fulfillment of his condition (he is always nice to everyone so everyone loves him). When we suggest that his behavior could be slightly changed, he is afraid that, if the condition will not be fulfilled (not everyone will love him), he will pay the price of losing his value. At the beginning, he will usually choose a price that is easiest for him to pay, the price he has always paid, the price he is used to paying (giving up on his own wishes so that others will be pleased and love him) and not the price of the loss of his sense of value which he will need to pay, as he mistakenly believes, for a new and different choice (e.g. it is enough if some love me, even if some don't). As mentioned, it is a mistake because his value is not dependent on anything. He will always have value. This is exactly what we need to persuade him of in therapy.

Adler thought that after the age of 5 (or 10) the individual has freedom of choice only with the help of therapy. Only in exceptional cases does an individual discover without therapy the possibility of choosing a different way from the one he chose in childhood. When this does happen, it is usually following a traumatic event related to an encounter with death.

To summarize: The Adlerian therapist wishes to guide the patient towards acknowledgement of the fact that he has free self-choice, that he can choose a new way—one that promises new benefits *and* new prices to pay. Regarding the patient's fear of losing value, it is our job to teach him or her that such a

² *The concept will be explained later.*

danger does not in fact exist, because an individual never loses his value. Everyone has a place; everyone belongs.

What has been said so far is purely theoretical. It may not make too much sense to you at this point, and you may not yet see its connection to psychotherapy, but these concepts are important as the basis for understanding human beings from the point of view of Individual Psychology. Therefore, we will continue with the next basic concept.

The principle of goal-directedness: The universal goal and the personal goal (lifestyle)

The philosopher Emanuel Kant taught us that we perceive “what is” (what exists) through cognitive schemas, which are an inseparable part of our perception. We do not know what really exists, as we do not perceive through our senses without the mediation of these schemas.

The Cognitive schema which is of interest to us here is the one which Kant called “the causal category.” We see a billiard stick pushing a ball. We see the ball roll. We do not see the ball roll *because* of the push from the stick. We add the “*because*.” It would take hard work to persuade us that the stick hit the ball and, at exactly that moment and without any connection between these occurrences, the ball rolled. We believe that we saw the ball roll *because* the stick hit it. This is not necessarily so, but we believe it is because we perceive with the schema of causality.

To demonstrate the idea that one after the other does not necessarily mean one because of the other, the late Dr. Meshulam Grol, lecturer of philosophy, used to tell a joke: During the Blitz in London, a bomb fell on a house. The house collapsed. When the rescuers arrived on the scene to see if anyone in the house was alive, they heard rolling laughter. They searched and searched and found a man in the toilet, holding the toilet chain, which was used back then to flush the toilet. The man could not stop laughing. “What is so funny?” they asked him. He replied, “Look at the standard of building today! I flush the chain, and the whole house collapses.”

Science is preoccupied with the connection between cause and effect. When we want to influence a certain phenomenon, it is worthwhile for us to know its cause so that we can influence it. Think of an illness. When we know the cause, we can look for a way to prevent or cure the illness.

This is how Freud acted when he originally looked for the cause of hysteria and when he looked for the causes of other psychiatric phenomena. As has already been said, we readily accepted and appreciated the reasons Freud found for our behavior, as they enabled us to be free of the responsibility for our actions, though, by the way, we were not free of responsibility for our good actions; we are only too happy to take responsibility for those. Rarely will we say, “I don’t know what came over me that I decided to volunteer to help. The urge just came from within and took me over, and I could do nothing to fight it.” We say such things only when we have done something that we think is wrong.

Adler was influenced by Kant, he added his own ideas on the issue of causality and wrote the following:

“In psychology, we cannot talk about causality or determinism (...). Man makes one thing the cause, and another thing the effect, and then joins the two. Much appears as causally determined, although causality was only attributed to it. (Adler, 1967, p. 91).

The idea Adler added is revolutionary. Indeed, we look for reasons for everything, and this is what science is based upon. But there is one case in which this principle does not hold. There is one being that has a certain range of freedom of choice that is not predetermined by a cause. A human being creates a goal for himself, and he chooses his actions according to this goal. His movement is goal-directed. A human being is not a billiard ball; one cannot make him do things he has not chosen to do.

This understanding makes it easier to accept the idea of freedom of choice. If my action is the result of a reason, I cannot have freedom of choice because the reason, which happened in the past, cannot be cancelled or changed. Accordingly, I cannot change the result either. However, if I act towards a goal that I myself created, then I am free. Goals are in the future, therefore I can change my previous goal and create a different one.

If you think about this for a moment, you will see that there is nothing we can do in therapy if we accept the assumption of causality. Suppose a client says, “My wife is always late. *Because* she’s late, I get hysterical, and then I become very angry, and I shout at her like mad.” If we accept his reasoning, what can we do? We can invite the wife to therapy and suggest she be punctual. But she will say, “I come late *because* I feel my boss expects me to stay late at work.” What will we do? Invite the boss to therapy and try changing his expectations of this woman? It is a never-ending chain, or, more accurately, a chain with no beginning. And if our patient’s hysterical rage attacks occur *because* his wife comes home late, there is nothing we can do for him.

But as we said, Adler did not accept the idea of causality as an explanation for human behavior. He claimed that we move towards goals. Therefore, in our therapeutic work, we will not deal with the reasons for our clients’ complaints; instead, we will look for their goal.

What are the goals according to Adler? To understand this, we must discuss two levels of goals.

The universal goal (common to all humans)

On the highest level, at a point towards which all humans strive, we find a goal common to all of us. The origins of this goal lie in a principle we have not yet discussed. This principle states that human beings are social creatures. We will return to this. As social creatures, our main aspiration is to feel a sense of belonging, to feel we have a place in society, that we matter, that we have meaning, that we are a significant part of the groups in which we function. Adler and Adlerians have many names for these goals. You will hear them later. What’s important is that you understand the meaning. The names are a sense of belonging, a sense of value, finding a place, and more. So what is the meaning of all these terms?

Each of us wants to be someone. Not necessarily someone important compared to someone who is not important, but someone as opposed to “no one.” We do not want to be transparent. We want people to notice if we don’t show up for a party and say to us later “we missed you.” We do not want our absence to go unnoticed. We want to be loved, valued, and desired, or at least some of the above and at least by one person. We want to be needed, wanted, and useful. We do not want the square we are standing on to be empty. Some express this by saying that they want to leave a mark, and some express it by saying they want many people at their funeral.

The lyrics of the Beatles song *Eleanor Rigby* talk about lonely people who have no place. The song says that when Eleanor Rigby was buried, it was (only) “along with her name”. Nobody but the priest came, and he had to. That is the fear. That is what we want not to happen. Therefore, we strive to feel we have a specific place. We do not want to feel that we are “just anyone.” The “secret” we reveal to our clients

(and to you, the reader), is that we all belong. Everyone has a place. Everyone has value. Everyone is needed in some way. There is no need to do or to be anything special.

The personal goal

The second level is the personal goal, and we will talk about this later. In the meantime, we will stay with this universal goal we all strive towards: to feel a sense of belonging in society, to believe we have a place among all others.

According to Adler, we can strive towards a sense of significance and value in two very different ways: either in a mistaken way or in the right way, in a way that creates difficulties for the individual and for society or a way that helps improve the emotional and actual situation of the individual as well as the community. Lydia Zicher, a follower and colleague of Adler, created an image to illustrate these two ways. Adlerians use this image to depict the two contradicting worldviews Adler talks about. The image clearly represents the two directions of striving people choose from as they set out to achieve a sense of having their place. For teaching purposes, I have adapted Zicher's geometrical image, and I present a depiction of the meaning of it in reality, both as a worldview and as a general typology of people (Abramson, 2005; Abramson, 2012; Abramson, 2015).

I will first present the “mistaken” view and then the “right” view, which is one of social interest. We are talking about two worldviews, two attitudes towards life, and two principal ways of being: A worldview characterized by being located on a vertical axis, and a worldview characterized by being located on a horizontal plane.

The vertical worldview

When I describe this worldview, you will notice that it is so common and so prominent in today's times that in the eyes of many it seems to be the only possible view. In my opinion, it is more common today than it was in the 20th century, when there were attempts to deviate from it, such as communism or the flower children.

Those who hold the vertical worldview see social life as if it exists on a ladder. The ladder begins at a very low point, lower than ground level, at a place where no one is prepared to remain because this would mean unbearable suffering. To perceive oneself in this position is to feel inferior. A person who sees himself at this low level lacks a sense of value and belonging in society. “I have no place. I am nothing. I am nobody,” he thinks.

The ladder, which climbs up to the sky, passes horizontal ground level where human society resides, crosses it and continues to climb. At its highest point lies the attainment of perfection, absolute control, absolute security, unlimited knowledge, and the whole gamut of superlatives—the best, the cleverest, the strongest, and (in these times) the richest. These are all characteristics that represent God. Up there we find success, triumph, and the vertical personal sense of value.

According to the vertical worldview, on every rung of the ladder there is room only for one. One person, one couple, one family, one company, one nation, one race, or one gender. The goal according to this worldview is to be superior, on top, to be “above.” This means that to be “high up” is a relative term. It is a competitive attitude. Those who hold this view believe, “I have value only if I am higher up than someone else. When I cannot be above someone else, I am in distress.” The philosopher Kierkegaard (2009) put it beautifully in his book *What Will Field Roses Say*:

The basis for every nationwide concern lies in man’s refusal to be happy with what he has, and his concerned longing for comparative uniqueness (p. 67).

Due to the concern of comparison, the concerned individual goes so far in comparing, that he forgets that he is a person, and out of despair sees himself so different from others, he sees himself different even from anything regarded as human (p. 65).

Adler says: When the attitude is competitive, the difference and diversity are interpreted as inferiority or superiority. And Kierkegaard, like Adler, proposes a different option:

Well, what does the concerned person learn from the field roses? He learns to be happy with what he has as a person, and he learns not to worry because of the difference and diversity between humans (p. 66).³

A child (or an adult) who feels inferior experiences an insufferable pain.⁴ “The supreme law [...] is this: the sense of worth of the self shall not be allowed to be diminished” (Adler, 1967, p. 358). Therefore, the child, and later the adult, who feels inferior, feels an urgent need to change his situation. In this situation the individual perceives his place on the vertical line as lower than that of others. Adler noticed an interesting phenomenon: The child who feels inferior does not strive—as may be expected—to be like others, to be part of the majority, who are located (in his eyes) above him on the horizontal line. This is not enough for him. The inferiority feeling creates in him a striving for “over compensation,” and he strives towards a high position on the ladder. In this position, he will be above others. As compensation for the inferiority he feels, he strives for superiority.

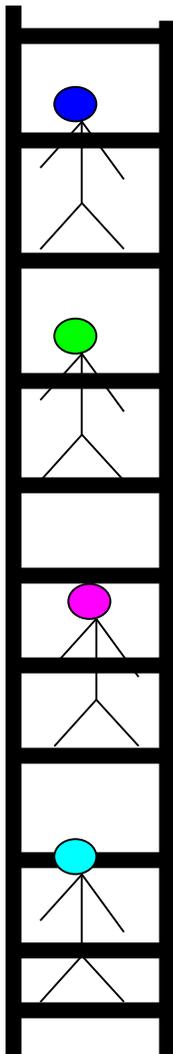
Nevertheless, we must remember that the pain appears as accompanying only the inferiority feeling we shall call social (“I am worth less than others”) and not the normal universal inferiority feeling (“I am inferior in comparison to the cosmos, and I am in a position of minus vies a vies the tasks of life before me”). These inferiority feelings are positive. It is what motivates us into movement and action. It is what motivates us to create solutions for problems, to create a culture, technology, civilization.

³ Translated from the Hebrew version by me Z.A.

⁴ The claim that to feel inferior is painful is mine. I take responsibility for it. Adler does not say it. He does not speak of suffering Adler writes only that the inferiority feeling is a situation the individual cannot remain in [Z.A.].

Once the superiority goal has been established, the individual feels inferior any time he is not in a position above others. If, instead, the same individual held a horizontal view (we will explain shortly what this means), not being superior would not be a problem for him. He would perceive himself as a regular guy “like everyone else,” an imperfect human being with strengths and weaknesses. He would not feel inferior.

But the person we are talking about here (we call him a “Verticalist”), his interpretation of the path he needs to walk to reach his goal, to achieve a sense of value and belonging, will entail achieving a high position, higher than others or the highest of all. To that end, he must overcome others that he encounters on his way. He must win through competition with them; he must beat them down. That is what he tries to do.



The competitive ladder: A vertical social worldview
Everyone is climbing. The goal is to get higher, to be the highest.

Drawing: Itamar Abramson

The horizontal worldview

This worldview is the alternative Adler proposes. It is based on the assumption that there is social equality between human beings. Those who hold this worldview look at social life as unfolding on a horizontal plane. The horizontal plain is at ground level, where all people are at the same height. All have equal value. Not only do they not compete, they cooperate, as all of them have a common goal, which is everyone's wellbeing.

The goal of the individual who perceives social life this way is also to overcome but not to overcome other human beings (as is the goal of those who hold the vertical worldview). Rather, those with a horizontal worldview seek to overcome the challenges and obstacles nature and social life place before them. This individual copes with the tasks of life in cooperation with others. That is where he gets a sense of belonging from. In contrast to the vertical view, the belief according to the horizontal view is that the individual finds his place in society not through winning or through achieving a high status but rather through making a contribution. For an action to be considered a contribution, it must be useful in some way; it must have meaning and importance not only for the individual himself but also for others, or at least one other. The "Horizontalist" (as I call him) is a person who has a well-developed social interest.

Social feelings bring about a sense of belonging, and a sense of belonging promotes social feelings. When I feel I am a significant part of the group, I care about the group. Such people are interconnected. The more stable and firm an individual's self-esteem and self-acceptance, the more confident he is that he has a place in the world, the less concerned he is about his own value, and the less self-centered he is. Therefore, his potential for developing social interest is greater. This person's energy is not caught by the need to prove his value. In other words, it is not his "ego" that guides his behavior but *the needs of the situation, the needs of others, and his own needs.*⁵

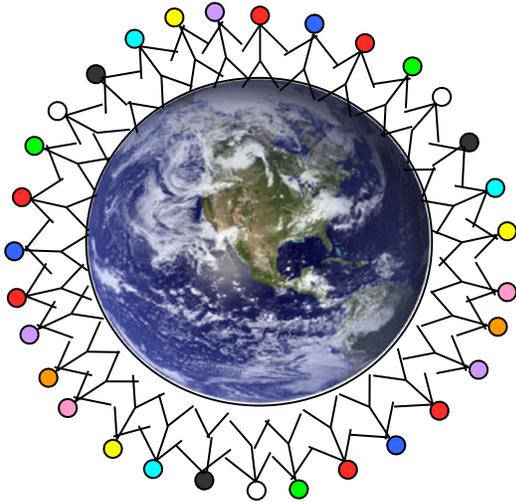
We shall return to the concept of social interest.

How does the horizontal view develop?

The horizontal view appears on the basis of the potential for social interest, a potential that exists in every human being. This potential is not automatically realized. It needs cultivation or at least the opportunity to develop. In this way, it is similar to the human potential to develop language skills. The potential for social interest found in humans is a result of humans being social creatures who cannot exist outside of society. People who have a well-developed social interest typically hold a horizontal view of social life. They understand and feel that we are all in the same boat. They understand that the boat sails forward or sinks depending on the amount of cooperation among us. They understand that we all have equal value because we each have a role; we each have a place. Every one of us is needed, and every one of us can

⁵ A formulation of E. Dreikurs Ferguson, 2008

make a contribution. We shall discuss later how, from the moment we are born, we owe what we find to the contributions of those who came before us.



A Horizontal worldview

All humans are equal, we are all here on the face of the earth, and we need to reach out and cooperate.

Drawing: Itamar Abramson

Let us meet those two types who hold these different views, so we can get to know them. We will first meet the “Verticalist” and then the “Horizontalist.”

Meeting the Verticalist

This individual striving upwards is preoccupied throughout his life, incessantly, with checking his relative position as he compares himself to others. He wishes to reach a high rung on the imaginary ladder (usually the highest), and he focuses only on certain areas. He chooses to climb specific “ladders” (not everyone strives to get a gold medal for high jumping in the Olympic Games), and he assesses success or failure only in terms of these ladders. Most often it is more than one ladder. Someone who wants to be the best carpenter will also want to be the best parent. The common denominator is the desire to be “the best,” or at least “better.”

The condition of success in the chosen area or areas must be fulfilled for the Verticalist to have a sense of value. “I can have a sense of value only if I have a high position in the academic world,” says one woman. Another woman will have a sense of value only if she believes she is the best housewife in her neighborhood. This will not be enough for her friend. The friend will feel a sense of value only if she fulfills a bunch of conditions: she runs the household perfectly; she has a respected career; she brings up successful children; she devotes much attention to her physical appearance (she starts her day with a run every morning). This kind of lifestyle belongs to the “superwoman” (we meet her in therapy because she is exhausted).

The Verticalist continuously compares. When he perceives someone else as placed higher than him on the ladder he chose for himself, he sees the other as a threat. This creates an inferiority feeling and anxiety. When he perceives someone else as placed lower on the ladder than him, he feels good, particularly if this is someone the Verticalist admires. As someone said, “He runs so fast! I barely won the race.” A woman who chooses beauty as her main ladder to determine her value enters a room and immediately looks around to see if there is someone more beautiful than she. If she thinks she is the most beautiful woman in the room, she will feel good and enjoy the social event. If she is not sure, she may find the event boring and leave after a short while.

The Verticalist is anxious not only because of the comparison with others; he is particularly anxious in situations where his inferiority (in his eyes) will be revealed, or rather in situations in which he cannot be the very best. He tries to avoid appearing in situations in which his superiority is not guaranteed.

The Verticalist acts in varied ways. If he believes in his ability to reach the highest rung, and if he is willing to invest the effort (that is to say, he is not spoiled or pampered), and if he does not expect things to happen by themselves, and if he is not passive and does not lack energy, then he will “climb” up the ladder. For example, if he is a sportsman he will train hard, and if he is a clerk he will stay overtime at work striving to receive “employee of the year” recognition. For a limited amount of time, he may be helpful to others and contribute towards solving problems.

The difference between him and the Horizontalist is that when no one notices his contribution or when he discovers that his work does not produce the desired success, he quits investing the effort. He feels low, loses courage, and often gives up or looks for another area in which he believes he can achieve superiority. When he discovers that he is not a star in the university as he was in high school, he may quit his studies and invest his efforts in fields such as veganism, asceticism, or another area wherein he believes he will be able to display superiority. As he does this, he moves from what Adler called “the useful side of life” to the *useless* side.

There are Verticalists who do not believe in their ability to achieve the elevated goal they believe is needed to achieve in order to have personal value, and there are those who do not want to invest the necessary effort required. Another way to put this is that there are Verticalists who have low self-esteem or are spoiled (pampered). Yet, these individuals wish to believe that they could have reached their goal and found a respected place in society if only they had invested significant long-term effort. However, they prefer to avoid the work, the long wait, and the potential humiliation (in their eyes) awaiting them on the way to the top, so they remain passive. These are people who sometimes develop symptoms on their way to the imagined summit or use excuses to explain why they have not reached it. Adler calls them “neurotics” (see Abramson, 2015 on the structure of Neurosis according to Adler). The meaning of the term neurosis according to Adler’s theory is different from the better known meaning of the term according to psychoanalysis. Adler used the same term Freud used, but his intention was totally different.

Additional characteristics of the Verticalist. Suspicion and caution characterize his interpersonal relationships. Will the other help him or harm him? Will the other assist him on his ascent on the vertical ladder, or will he possibly hurt him and push him down to a lower rung on the ladder? Is he a dangerous opponent? The Verticalist is self-centered, he is not interested in the point of view of the other, nor in

the needs of the situation or of the group. He is preoccupied with his own honor and value. Every other individual is a potential competitor, and therefore, in some way, an enemy. As there is room for only one person on every rung of the ladder, it is an “either or” situation. Either I am superior, or you are. This is why the Verticalist tends to be involved in actual or imagined fights. Taking the other into consideration is less important to him (if it is important at all) than considering the rise or fall of his own status. His actions are directed towards winning, not towards finding a solution.

Communication patterns characteristic of the Verticalist. These include criticism, judgment, humiliating the other, taking control, and condescending. The Verticalist’s competitiveness may also appear in the form of an offer of help or advice when neither were asked for as well as in the form of admiration, submissiveness, and exaggerated modesty. Often the Verticalist will express his admiration for another, placing him high up on the ladder but soon after humiliating him directly or indirectly. For example, this happens in a therapist-client relationship wherein the client glorifies the therapist’s power and skills only to attempt to prove later that the therapist, despite his apparent competence, will not succeed in solving his problems. (“You will not manage to solve *my* problems.”)

Emotions characterizing the Verticalist. Stress and pressure. When the Verticalist is successful, he feels exalted, but when something endangers his success, he feels anger. There can even be rage attacks against others who he perceives caused his downfall. We also find depression, self-pity and anxiety, depending on that individual’s life plan (lifestyle). For example, a person who behaves in a way that (in his eyes) should place him at the top of the morality ladder will experience criticism of his behavior as very hurtful. He will put a lot of effort into proving that he is never to be blamed. It was always the other who was unfair towards him. Someone who wants to be loved by all will have difficulty sleeping if he discovers that a member of his group dislikes him. As the goal is to achieve full success and perfect results, the Verticalist, and therefore the neurotic, holds the view of “all or nothing.” They never say things such as “sometimes,” “partial success,” or “it can be done this way or that way.”

Socrates as an example. I will use the philosopher Socrates, who was sentenced to death by his people, to explain the thought process and behavior of a person whose lifestyle is vertical. From the Adlerian point of view (the iron logic of social living is the only truth), Socrates was not innocent. His actions and his words expressed vanity and condescendence while putting down others⁶.

Being condescending to someone entails humiliating that person, and Socrates humiliated many. We can learn this by listening to his words to the judges presiding over his trial, as recorded by Plato in his volume *Apology of Socrates* (1984). First, Socrates reports that the oracle’s priestess said “[...] that no one was wiser [than I]” (P. 69). I, he says to the judges, am at the highest point [on the vertical axis of wisdom]. But this is not enough for him. Nothing is ever enough for the Verticalist. Socrates describes himself as not only wise but also modest, and therefore he went to search for someone wiser than he. He approached “[...] one of those reputed to be wise...” and discovered that this person was not really wise. “I tried to show him that he supposed he was wise, but was not; so from this I became hateful both to him and to many of those present” (Ibid, p. 70). Is there someone who would not “become hateful” to a

⁶ Of course, Adler would not sentence him to death for that sin.

person who “shows” such a thing to him? But this is not enough for Socrates. He finds a way to promise to himself that he is wisest of all:

(...) I reasoned with regard to myself: "I am wiser than this human being. [That man who was reputed to be wise]... As he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do ...; I went to someone else, to one of those reputed to be wiser than he, and these things seemed to me to be the same. And there I became hateful both to him and to many others" (Ibid.).

This depicts a vertical lifestyle in the form of a clear and narrow condition for having a sense of value. A person living in accordance with this lifestyle believes he must be the absolute cleverest human being⁷.

Let's continue our analysis of Socrates. He would walk through the markets, start talking to people, and would not leave them alone until he had shown them that they don't know what they believe they know. In other words, he constantly humiliated others. Finally, according to the account of Xenophon (2001), the belief of Socrates that he always had to be superior or else he was not a significant human being was even stronger than his will for life. He did not see the point in staying alive once others did not perceive him as superior. In *Memorabilia*, Xenophon quotes Socrates trying to persuade his listeners that he should die:

"Don't you know that up to this time I, for my part, would not have yielded to any human being that he lived either a better or more pleasant life than mine? [...] I have continued in this judgment about myself. And not only I, but my friends also continue to judge likewise about me [...] for the very reason that they think that by being in my company they themselves, too, would become best. But if I should live longer, perhaps it will be necessary to pay the price of old age, both seeing and hearing less, and thinking more poorly, and ending by being less capable of learning and more forgetful, and becoming worse in the things I was better before". (Ibid, p. 148 - 149)

These are the words of he who experiences social superiority as an existential condition for value and is willing to give up years of his life in older age as long as he will not have to be seen in his weakness and lose his dignity.

Those who hold a more horizontal view are usually happy to remain on planet Earth for a while longer, even when their mental and physical capacities decline. They want to curiously watch what is going on around them, including the development of their children and grandchildren. Socrates' feeling that his life has value only when he is above others, his behavior, his manner of speech, and the choices he made in his lifetime exemplify the Verticalist lifestyle.

⁷ Today's Psychiatry would probably suspect the presence of paranoid tendencies, meaning that the person believes everyone hates him and is out to get him because he is superior.

A comment

The Socrates narrative was used here only to demonstrate the behavior of a person striving for superiority. The real Socrates no doubt belonged to that group of artists and philosophers who Adler believed had the right to be different, to distance themselves from society, and to avoid solving certain life problems, such as working for livelihood (Socrates did not provide for his family). This “special permission” was given by Adler due to the fact that these individuals “serve a social function more than anyone else. It is they who have taught us how to see, how to think and how to feel” (Adler, 1967. P. 153).

The origin of the Verticalist view of social life. A misunderstanding, a mistake. He perceives himself as inferior, or he believes he might easily slip down to an inferior position. He does not believe that people have equal value as they are, with their strengths and weaknesses. He does not understand the way human society works. His mistaken striving to overcome his alleged inferiority leads to a decline and to psychological downfall “...as any biological erroneous striving had led to the physical decline and fall of entire species and races” (Adler, 1979, p. 39).

Once the Verticalist learns and accepts the horizontal way of thought, he can achieve greater tranquility, a better life, and harmony in his interpersonal relationships. We call he who understands this and acts accordingly a Horizontalist, and in our therapeutic work we try to lead clients in this direction. What is a Horizontalist like?

Meeting the Horizontalist

According to Adler, the Horizontalist is the mentally healthy individual. He is an individual whose social interest is highly developed, which is equivalent to mental health in Adler’s eyes.

This individual not only understands but feels the connection between his own good and the good of the other, and of society in general. His attitude towards life is based on his sense of belonging. He knows he is a part of society, a significant part. As such, he is invested in the goals and the good of the group. He does not perceive his own goals and those of others as contradictory. He respects both himself and others. He is not afraid of losing his position. He knows that he will have a place even if he makes a mistake or fails⁸.

The Horizontalist focuses his attention on performing the three life tasks (work, intimacy, and social relations), which means he is not self-centered. He strives to cultivate wellbeing, health, and joy for others and for himself. For him, there is no condition that must be fulfilled to make him valuable. He acts according to the needs of the situation, which means his behavior is varied, not rigid. His behavior in different situations is variable. He fills different social roles. While in most situations he is content with being part of the group, he may take a leadership role in a certain group if he has the chance and the belief that he can manage the specific situation. When performing tasks, he will invest effort into getting them done in the best way he can. The result will often be good and useful. Sometimes it will be almost

⁸ *We shall learn more about social interest later.*

perfect. Sometimes, he may invest less in his performance and be satisfied with a reasonable result (he is not a perfectionist). He gets involved; he is interested in and cares about what happens around him. He has empathy and can identify with others. He often puts the needs of others before his own needs, but he doesn't neglect his own needs and desires. He strives to develop his potential, not in order to win the race but in order to grow as a person and to be able to contribute to his fellow men. He is prepared to practice skills he does not excel at and to take part in activities at which he is not the best. He may do it for the purpose of contributing to others or simply for the pleasure he finds in the activity.

His attitude towards mistakes. When the Horizontalist, his children, or his employees make a mistake, he looks at it as an opportunity for learning, development, and progress. This attitude towards mistakes is connected to the courage to be imperfect, meaning he admits that he is not perfect. Rudolf Dreikurs emphasized "the courage to be imperfect" as the most important type of courage a person needs to have. It is the courage to try even when one is not sure of a successful result. It is the courage to dare when one is not sure to succeed. It is the courage and the willingness to act for the sake of fulfilling the needs of others. The Horizontalist believes in acting to solve problems, to move forward, and he is willing to take the risk that his actions will not yield personal gains.

The Horizontalist will risk failure. When he fails, he looks for a solution instead of giving up and taking a different path. He won't experience failure as insulting or humiliating.

Functioning in the three areas of life (work, love, and society). The Horizontalist functions adequately in all three areas of life. He usually has positive social connections, equality-based family relationships (with flexibility in the division of roles and responsibilities), and, last but not least, he functions well at work. He takes responsibility for whatever he is doing. He invests the necessary energy in his work, and he continues to do so even if it doesn't bring him awards, success, or fame. This is a person characterized by a high level of energy and activity, regardless of his social status.

Cooperation characterizes his behavioral patterns. He can include others and take part in a group activity without becoming preoccupied with who did what and how much. Unlike the Verticalist, he and others recognize the same obstacles. For the Verticalist, an obstacle is everything he fears will put him down. When a Verticalist discovers someone in class who seems cleverer than he is, he experiences the person's intelligence as an obstacle, yet it is an obstacle only in his eyes. When the power goes out while the Horizontalist is working at the computer, it is an obstacle for him as much as it would be for everyone else. When faced with a problem, he looks for a good solution and acts independently and responsibly.

The lifestyle of a Horizontalist includes respect for himself and for others. He tends to encourage others. He accepts others as they are and does not spend much time criticizing them or complaining about them. Sometimes he is the one who explains things to others, and sometimes he is the one who asks the questions.

The general picture. The Horizontalist is relaxed. He has a sense of belonging. He knows he has a place in his community and inherent value. He is self-confident. He trusts himself and others; therefore, he can act spontaneously and reasonably. He has no need to check and know everything in advance. The Horizontalist is, in most cases, a curious person. He is curious both about his own fields of interest and about the interests of others. He is interested in many things and doesn't get bored easily. He believes

things will turn out well. He is courageous, open, and can handle frustration. This is because he has nothing to fear. He does not see others as enemies, and he is not concerned about losing his place if he makes a mistake or fails, or should his weaknesses be revealed. This is why he is good at intimate relationships based on openness and honesty, with room for revealing weaknesses. The sources of the Horizontalist's feeling of self-worth are investment in giving to others, commitment (if I don't show up, I will be missing, and that will cause problems), dedication, and a sense of responsibility. None of these depends on others.

Make no mistake, the Horizontalist is not always friendly or happy. When he finds that his rights are infringed upon, when he is mistreated, oppressed, or harmed, he will not accept the position of victim. He who accepts this position is overcompensating for his feelings of inferiority. It is rewarding for him to be perceived as a victim because it gives him a feeling of moral superiority. A healthy individual does not need such superiority. When he feels dissatisfied with his life, he does the best he can to change things for himself and for others who are in the same position.

A comment to avoid discouragement

We have looked at the archetypes of the Verticalist and the Horizontalist. Yet it is not an either-or situation. We are not one or the other. I have described people at the extremes of the continuum for didactic purposes. We do not meet people like the ones described here, neither the Horizontalist nor the Verticalist, on a daily basis. I presented schemas to depict the principles of both the mistaken and the correct life views in the eyes of Adler.

In my opinion, if we imagine the intersection between the vertical and the horizontal axes, we will find most of us, if not all of us, in the space between the two axes. Some of us are closer to the one, and some of us are closer to the other. We are somewhere between the two, a little bit more in one or the other direction. Adler and Dreikurs both thought we should strive towards the horizontal life view in order to foster better lives for individuals, within groups, and for humanity ever after.

Admittedly, Adler himself wrote dichotomously. Once he placed the social feeling at the core of his theory, he spoke and wrote as if in reality there are "normal" people, the Horizontalists,⁹ who have a well-developed social interest, and the "neurotics," who are Verticalists whose social interest is underdeveloped. He wrote as if each and every one of us belongs to one of these groups. The "neurotic" makes a mistake when misunderstanding the "iron logic of communal living," as do criminals, addicts, the mentally ill, and perverts. Alternatively, the healthy or "normal" individual (he who has a highly developed social feeling) lives life as it should be lived and contributes to a better future for all humanity.

⁹ As mentioned, Adler was not the one who used the terms Horizontal and Vertical. They were the contribution of his colleague Lydia Sicher.

Back to the principle of goal-directedness: What is lifestyle, or the personality according to Adler

One might ask the question: If, for example, all humans strive to reach the northern pole, will they not all take the same route to get there? If all humans strive towards the same goal, how is it that they don't all act in the same manner? How is it that they don't all behave in the same way? The answer is that each individual chooses a path he or she believes will lead him or her to the universal goal. Each one of us wishes to feel that we have a place, and each one of us has his personal interpretation about the specific way in which he will achieve this goal.

For example, the Verticalist may believe, "I have value when I am the wealthiest person in the neighborhood." He will strive to reach that goal. Or he may believe, "I count, but only once I know everything." This Verticalist will strive to always be informed. The Horizontalist may feel, "I belong as I contribute. Therefore, I am needed and wanted by others." His contribution may be, "My children are always clean and tidy. They are good students and good friends." Or it may be, "I am a teacher, and I teach children what they will need to know when they grow up."

People will come to us for therapy due to problems derived from their personal interpretation of their Vertical view. For example, if someone's personal interpretation of the goal is the idea that in order to feel a sense of belonging he needs to be treated like a king, he will come to therapy because someone is not giving him enough respect. The Verticalist's means of attaining a sense of belonging are linked to conditions that cannot always be fulfilled. They can sometimes be fulfilled, possibly even much of the time, but they cannot always be fulfilled because they depend on others.

The personal goal

The individual's interpretation of the specific way in which he will attain a sense of belonging and value molds the core goal that leads him through life. If I think that to feel a sense of value I need to be "a good boy," I will behave for my entire life in a way that I think will cause others to see me as a "good boy." This becomes a goal because it is the condition I have created that, according to my belief, must be fulfilled in order for me to feel like I have a place. Adler called this goal "*the fictional personal goal.*" It is fictional because the individual invented it, and because there is no way it will always be attainable in reality. This goal has no objective-independent existence. It is not a goal in the sense that there is something concrete to attain in the future, and I strive towards it like I would strive to reach a mountain top which is objectively there. It is a fictional goal. The individual invented it himself, created it, and placed it in the future. Let me mention again that if you strive to reach a goal that you yourself have created, you are in fact free because you have the option of creating a slightly different goal. Accordingly, you may change the direction of your movement. The principle of goal-directedness helps us understand the idea of personal freedom we mentioned earlier.

Adler says that any personal goal is actually based on a mistake. The mistake is to believe that this personal goal needs to be fulfilled in order for the individual to belong, to have a place in the social world. The truth is no goal has to be fulfilled. We keep coming back to this idea again and again, both in therapy and in class: Every individual has a place in the social world.

Now we ask the questions: *How does one create a personal goal? When does this happen?*

It mostly takes place within the first five years of life, although the years between five and ten may also be influential. It is during these early years that the child forms his lifestyle. The fictional personal goal is the center of the lifestyle. Let us now speak about lifestyle: How is it formed? How does it develop and crystallize over time until it becomes the individual's personality?

Development of the lifestyle

Every individual has from earliest childhood on his own, unique law of movement, which dominates all his functions and expressive movements and gives them direction. The flow of movement and its direction originate from the creative life power of the individual, and use, in free choice, one's experiences of one's body and of external affects [...] (Adler, 1979, p. 51).

Adler was a cognitive psychologist. Lifestyle is a cognitive concept central to his theory. Today, the word "lifestyle" is used in various ways. It is easier to understand what Adler means when we remember that at an earlier stage of the development of his theory he called it a "life plan," and indeed it is a plan. The plan is based on a system of assumptions the individual creates for himself, particularly during the first five years of his life. This plan includes assumptions about anything and everything. One can categorize them with the following questions: What am I? What is life? Especially, what is social life? What is social life supposed to be? And then as a conclusion: How should I behave in life so that I will have a place, so that I will succeed in life? The meaning of success is subjective. The subjective interpretation of success is the personal goal to which I aspire based on my belief that achieving this goal will give me a sense of having a place. The lifestyle is like a roadmap the individual uses to choose his direction in life, which is why it helps us understand and predict the individual's movement in his life. It is important for us therapists to recognize a client's lifestyle, including his basic assumptions, his goals, and his strategies for achieving those goals, as these are the keys to understanding the difficulties the client is experiencing.

The human comes into the world as a baby equipped with a life force given to him by the cosmos. The human's primeval task is to access this force to cope, survive, progress, and develop on earth. All of this means to be in motion (movement). The only way a human being can fulfill this task is within the framework of human society of which he is always a part. We will talk about this further. Besides his body parts and senses, the human has an additional organ at his service, the mental organ. The functions of the mental organ are psychological. With the help of these psychological functions, the human maintains social connections. This mental organ is the pinnacle of the development of the life force and includes cognitive abilities such as:

- 1- The ability to acquire language and create concepts, which is an indispensable prerequisite for communication and cooperation (see the story of the Tower of Babylon).
- 2- The ability to foresee the future, to choose values intentionally, and to plan movement to fulfill these values.

Adler repeatedly emphasizes that the mental organ, the highlight of the human being, is creative. Because humans create, they are unlike any other being on earth. To produce an original creation is to make something that did not exist prior to the act of creation. It is not a part obtained through the analysis of the whole, nor the combination of more than one whole. It is not the result of a cause or of a deterministic development. It cannot be predicted in advance. The meaning of creation is to add something that didn't previously exist into this world. This is the unique tapestry that the child creates for himself from the moment of birth until the age of five—his lifestyle. It is his answer to the questions: Who are you? What kind of a person do you choose to be? How will you exist, and how will you strive to overcome obstacles and move towards the success that will give you a sense of belonging? How will you find a place for yourself in human society? The answer to all of these questions is what gives the individual the orientation he needs to move through life.

How is the lifestyle created?

We can compare a newborn baby's situation to that of any of us arriving in a foreign country without knowledge of the language and with the desire to receive citizenship. In the beginning, when the newcomer cannot fend for himself, he is lucky. A loving family, and in particular the mother of the family, assume responsibility for and take care of all his needs. He looks around, listens, follows the goings-on around him, and learns. He draws conclusions about people and processes in the foreign country. He draws conclusions based on what he sees and experiences in that family. He might, for example, conclude that people are happy in this country or that people are tense. If people disappoint him frequently and do not attend to his needs for nourishment and warmth, he might conclude that one cannot rely on others in this country, and he must take care of himself or take care of others. If, for example, they take care of him constantly, and all of their efforts focus on his needs while they neglect themselves and others, he may conclude that he is special and deserves special, ongoing attention. He quickly begins to act out of his own initiative and discovers that, while some of his actions result in positive reactions from others, other actions cause others to keep their distance from him, which causes him frustration.

Different kinds of behavior lead to different reactions. He might conclude that when the family thinks he is nice, he feels good. Or, when the family exerts pressure on him and tries to control him with power, he might find it unpleasant. In such a case, he might believe that he is accepted only when he gives in. Based on many experiences and impressions (which for him are objective facts), as well as his subjective perception and interpretation of these facts, the "newcomer" creates a life plan for himself.

Based on his interpretations of what is going on, he slowly forms assumptions about how things work in his new country. He conceptualizes what kind of a person he is, what place he has in the group, what possibilities are available to him, what he is capable of, and what he is incapable of. He creates a plan about the path he will walk in this country (in life). He marks the goal he wants to strive towards so that he will have a place as a successful citizen in this country (humanity) where he has arrived and will remain in for the rest of his life.

All of these processes are creations of the newcomer. We can never know what conclusions he will come to, how he will interpret events, and what plan he will create for himself. The baby acts like the newcomer. It wants to succeed in the world he has arrived in, meaning he wants to feel a sense of belonging and a sense of value. He constructs interpretations, draws conclusions, and makes assumptions. We must remember—and this is one of the sources of our difficulties in life—that these interpretations and conclusions are made by a child with the cognitive ability from the ages of zero to five. This is the explanation for why the assumptions are often not compatible with common sense and that they are often overgeneralizations. We cannot predict the way in which the child will choose to behave or the goal towards which he will strive, but he will undoubtedly create a plan for himself that will include both his goal and his strategies to achieve it.

The strategies for reaching the goal vary. For example, a child may believe that in order to feel like he has a significant place in his family he must always be in the center of attention and receive services from family members. He may discover that he can attain this goal by being sick because parents naturally give special attention to a sick child (this may then develop into hypochondria). He may discover that he can gain attention and even admiration by talking all the time and by saying “smart” things. He may discover that he can gain attention and special services by doing nothing. He might stare at his socks for twenty minutes in the morning instead of putting them on, inciting his parents to urge him on every few minutes and, when he continues to do nothing, to put the socks on his feet themselves. This is as much a mechanism of attention as the active one I described. Indeed, there are many ways to reach a goal.

Adler calls the ideological construct which includes our assumptions, beliefs, our goal, and our strategies to reach this goal our “private logic.” Can logic be private? This expression seems to include an internal contradiction, as logic is concerned with universal analytic truths accepted by all. Adler illustrated the two sides of the coin with this expression. On the one hand, the meaning of logic in this context is that if one accepts the basic assumptions an individual has about himself (for example, “I am small and weak”) and about others (for example, everyone wants to hurt me”), then the logic behind the conclusion the individual has come to is understandable (for example, “I must be careful of people”).

Yet Adler contrasts the expression “private sense” (or logic) with “common sense.” Private logic is based on the person's subjective interpretation of reality. We will always find some distance between private logic and what Adler calls “the iron logic of communal life” (Adler, 1967, p. 127). For Adler, this logic is the “truth.”

Several factors influence, but do not determine, the lifestyle the child creates.

The main factors that influence lifestyle:

- Family constellation: position in the birth order, age gaps between siblings, gender of siblings
- Family atmosphere: a certain atmosphere characterizes each family
- Educational methods of the parents

This is what Ahi Yotam said, and I add:

- The parents: a) Their lifestyle, b) their relationship, c) the relationship between each parent and each of the children, and especially with the client
- Existence or absence of inferiority feelings

We can compare the factors that influence lifestyle to a big collection of mosaic pieces spread out before us on the floor. These mosaic pieces are what the child is born with. They are the data with which he grows; they are the things he cannot choose. Let us suppose that each one of us is asked to create a picture, a mosaic, out of these pieces. We know that each one of us will create a different picture out of the same pieces. The difference will depend on what pieces, what colors, what form, and what arrangement of pieces and colors we choose. Clearly, the fact that these are the pieces spread out on the floor does not determine what picture we create, yet they will have an influence on what the picture will look like. We need to get to know these influences when we wish to understand a client's lifestyle, his assumptions, and his personal goal.

Adler believed that by the age of five the child has almost completed forming his lifestyle. His followers added that there are possibilities for minor changes and adjustments due to significant events in the child's life over the next five years of life (until the age of ten).

Achi Yotam used to say that he believes adolescence to be another opportunity for making meaningful adjustments to lifestyle. Having worked with couples for many years I allow myself to add that, I have seen changes of lifestyles within couple's relationships. This sometimes happens in therapy when one member of the couple discovers he may lose his partner, the person who is so important and dear to him or her.

Lifestyle: the main limitation of freedom of self-choice

Let's now return to the idea of freedom of self-choice and discuss its main limitation. Adler said that lifestyle is formed by the age of five, and that after this age personal freedom is limited. After the lifestyle is formed, the child (and later, the adult) will always react to reality according to the basic assumptions at the core of his lifestyle and according to his personal goal (the unique way in which he attains a sense of belonging). He interprets every situation he faces according to his style. It is usually only with the help of therapy that he can make real change¹⁰.

¹⁰ We should add outstanding educational systems and teachers to the idea of "therapy." For example, a teacher who nurtures a discouraged child, therapeutic institutions, group work in rehabilitation centers and such.

And now in brackets: The problem of typology

Talking about lifestyle, we need to discuss the question of typology (dividing people into types). During your training, many examples will be provided. The examples will be stereotypical, and we always need to remember that nobody, no patient, ever fits into a stereotype.

Lifestyle is like a “haute couture” garment in the sense that it is suited to a specific person. When we work with a client, we need to study the unique complexity of his assumptions, perceptions, the meanings he ascribes to situations and his goals.

However, in order to teach and communicate with colleagues, or to create mutual understanding in supervision and in staff meetings, we sometimes find we need to use typologies. I repeat: We will never label a patient in therapy and maintain that he *is* one of the types we have been discussing. Still, there is no way out of forming types. Here is what Adler wrote on the topic of typology:

Life... moves ever toward overcoming, toward perfection, toward superiority, toward success... But what an individual thinks or feels as success... is unique with him. In our experience we have found that each individual has a different meaning of, and attitude toward, what constitutes success. Therefore, a human being cannot be typified or classified. We believe that the parsimony of language causes many scientists to come to mistaken conclusions, to believe in types, entities, and racial qualities. Individual psychology recognizes... that each individual must be studied in the light of his own peculiar development. To present the individual understandably, in words, requires an extensive reviewing of all his facets. Yet too often psychologists are tempted away from this recognition to take the easier but unfruitful roads of classification. That is a temptation to which, in practical work, we must never yield (Adler, 1967, p. 167).

Having said that, Adler then proceeds to give us his classification. As he says, for the purpose of teaching and also for communication and discussions among professionals, he himself formed a kind of typology.

It is for teaching purposes only, to illuminate the broad field, that we shall designate here four different types in order to classify temporarily the attitude and behavior of individuals toward outside problems (Ibid).

The four categories Adler presents:

First group: The Controller

We find people whose attitude towards reality, from early childhood and throughout their life, is characterized by dominance and control... which appear in all of their relationships.

Second group: The Getter

People in this group, which is undoubtedly the most common group, expect “everything” from others, and rely on them.

Third group: The Avoider

The third type [which we will come across when we learn about neurosis], tends to feel he succeeds when he avoids solving a problem. Instead of struggling with a problem, this kind of person only tries to move away from the problem, and in this manner attempts to prevent failure.

Fourth group: The Mentally Healthy

The fourth type [who we call the Horizontalist] struggles, more or less, to solve problems in a way which will be helpful to others.

The first three types mentioned above... are not apt, and are not prepared, to solve the problems of life. These problems are always social problems, and individuals of these three types lack the ability to cooperate and to contribute. The clash between such a life style (lacking in social interest) and the outside problems (demanding social interest) results in shock. This shock leads up to the individual's failures, which we know as neurosis, psychosis, and other maladjustments... in the fourth type (the socially useful type), prepared for cooperation and contribution, we can always find a certain amount of activity which is used for the benefit of others. This activity is in agreement with the needs of others. It is useful, normal, rightly embedded in the stream of evolution of mankind. The first type also has activity, but not enough social interest. Therefore, if confronted strongly by a situation which he feels to be in the nature of examination, a test of his social value, a judgment upon his social usefulness, a person of this type acts in an unsocial way...

...The second and third types show even less activity and not much social interest. This lack appears also in the expression of their shock results, which are neuroses and psychoses. The principles which guide us when grouping individuals into these four types are the degree of their approach to social integration and the form of movement which they develop (with greater or lesser activity (Ibid, p. 167-169).

Adler emphasizes that we can make many varied categorizations. Indeed, some of his followers created other typologies, including William Bill Pew, Nira Kefir, and Roy Kern. However, once you start working, you will realize that people never precisely fit into any of the categories. Instead, each individual has his own private, unique, and creative mosaic, characteristic only of himself.

Holism

Adler believed that a human being is a whole system, which is prior to its various parts¹¹. It acts in its entirety as a unified whole, striving towards the fictional goal it set for itself. This whole expresses itself in interactions with other wholes, who form society. The principle of holism was of great and special importance to Adler. This was the reason he called his theory “Individual Psychology,” by which he meant that it was the psychology of the indivisible human being. Adler chose this name shortly after leaving Freud’s group. Freud divided the psyche into different parts.

When he said that the human system moves as a whole, Adler meant that the lifestyle—the assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations—is the system that unifies and controls all of the individual’s expressions. All of the human psychological functioning, every instinct, urge, emotion, thought, attitude, and action, all are subject to the whole. What others call the “self,” or the “ego,” or the “personality,” are none other than the individual’s lifestyle. “Character” is nothing other than the form in which the central line of movement of the individual’s lifestyle is expressed. Achi Yotam used to say that people call the characteristic behavior of an individual his character. This is an important distinction because people often assume that character is a given that cannot be changed, but characteristic behavior *can* change. Adler said:

Very early in my work, I found man to be a [self-consistent] unity. 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. This [self-consistent] unity we call the style of life of the individual (Adler, 1967, p. 175).

What this means is that all mental functioning strives and is directed towards the same goal. There is always internal consistency, in spite of the fact that it does not always appear this way. Let us consider the simplistic example of the prototype Adler called “The Controller.” The Controller strives to control those around him. All of this individual’s thoughts and emotions are directed towards achieving control. His behavior is directed towards obtaining obedience from others. He may accomplish this thorough the use of various strategies. He may seek this obedience by subordinating others physically, or intellectually (by using persuasive powers), or perhaps by giving the impression of suffering (be hurt, insulted), which will force others to act according to his wishes in order to save him from his misery and themselves from the guilt. There are many possibilities. Should such an individual face resistance and have a hard time getting his way, he will need to produce the appropriate emotion necessary for further persuasion. If he chooses to eliminate the resistance through intimidation, he may produce fury that will enable him to break out loudly and violently. If this rage is not effective, he may try to produce feelings of sadness, or

¹¹ An expansion on the topic of holism can be found in the book by Jan Smuts on his philosophy called “Holism” (Smuts, 1927). In this book, Adler found important support for his ideas. Take note of the unusual spelling: Holism written with an H.

self-pity. Using cognition to attempt persuasion with logic, violent actions, and feelings of anger or self-pity are all strategies used in the pursuit of the same goal. Adler says:

Authors who emphasize a part of the whole are likely to attribute to this part all the aptitudes and observations pertaining to the self, the individual. They show “something” which is endowed with prudence, determination, volition, and creative power without knowing that they are actually describing the self, rather than drives, character traits, or reflexes (Ibid, p. 175).

It seems to me the claim that we produce our emotions so they will serve as fuel for our actions towards achieving our goal (as Dreikurs framed it), contradictory to the subjective experience, wherein emotions just appear and make us do things, is the argument in Adler’s theory that is most difficult to understand, internalize, and accept.

Three expressions of the holistic viewpoint

The principle of Holism is expressed and can be seen, both in daily life and in therapy, in three ways.

1 - Mind and body

The idea that the body and the mind are one is very popular today. Adler was the first theorist to mention this. True, there is a certain unity of the body and the mind, yet they do not fully overlap. Some of the body components are what we call “data.” These components are not subject to our free self-choice. We are not free to choose these or to change them. We cannot change our height, our voice, or the color of our eyes. These are just a few examples. What we can choose is our interpretation of the given facts and, accordingly, our reaction to them. Yet there are bodily expressions that are strongly connected to lifestyle, such as body language and, to a certain extent, medical phenomena.

The case of medical problems is not clear-cut. Often it is difficult to distinguish between physiological symptoms that are goal-directed and those which appear and exist independently of the psychological makeup of the patient. For example, when I studied psychology, an ulcer was still believed to be connected to a conflict with a dominating mother. Later, it was discovered that ulcers are bacterial. Yet there are those who believe that the growth of this bacteria is triggered by certain mental states. The same is true of asthma and of erectile dysfunction. In the past, the symptoms of these conditions were associated with emotional problems. Individuals who suffered from erectile dysfunction went to psychoanalysis to cure their Oedipal complex. It was later discovered that at least in half of these cases, a physiological, organic basis was found. Today there are doubts surrounding fibromyalgia. There are no organic findings to date associated with this illness. A genetic predisposition is often found for certain illnesses, yet they are triggered by certain mental states. We are never sure about a physical illness, and therefore we will never blame a client for choosing it as a goal-directed symptom, and we will never provide mental health treatment before referring the client to a doctor in order to perform the appropriate medical tests. When Adlerians say that a physical condition is connected to a mental issue, they mean that the physical condition is goal-oriented. In such cases the goal is almost always avoidance of the fulfillment of a life task.

In order to distinguish an illness or any physical disorder that has a psychological background from an illness or a physical disorder over which the individual has no control, Dreikurs invented what we call “*The question*,” with an emphasis on *the*. The question is “If you weren’t suffering from this illness, what, in your life, would be different? What would change?” If the answer is, for example, “If it weren’t for this stupid illness I would be able to find a job and work,” then we may surmise that the goal of the physical condition is to enable respectful avoidance of the life task of work. In other words, the physical condition has a goal. It is used as an alibi for not fulfilling one of the life tasks. On the other hand, if the answer is “I would continue my life in the same way, only I would suffer less and I would enjoy my life,” then we may assume that we should search for a physical explanation for this patient’s complaints.

So, even though we do not fully understand the connection between mind and body, they are unified. One cannot think of either of them as separate from the other. This unity is essential to humanness.

2 - The Psyche is indivisible

The second prominent expression of the principle of Holism is one of the main elements that clearly differentiates between the theories of Adler and Freud (see Abramson, 2016). According to Freud, the psyche is made up of different parts: the id, the ego, and the super ego; the conscious and the unconscious; the censor and the conscience. Adler finds all of this meaningless and even slightly ridiculous. He believes that there is only lifestyle, and that everything— all thoughts, feelings, and actions—are conducted according to the lifestyle. Without mentioning Freud, Adler suggested that psychologists tend to present their theories with the help of metaphors taken from mechanics or physics. We cannot be sure whether his intention in the following words was serious or if he meant it as a provocation:

At one time they use as a comparison a pump handle moving up and down, at another a magnet with polar termini, at another a sadly harassed animal struggling for the satisfaction of its elementary needs (Adler, 1967, p. 92).

Adler's belief in an indivisible personality leads us to the topic of a so-called inner conflict. Under the influence of Freud, it is often called “ambivalence.” For Adlerians, deliberating about an inner conflict belongs in quotation marks.

It is difficult to recognize the unity of the individual when he experiences conflicting wishes, or when he experiences and expresses conflicting emotions. Following Freud’s ideas, there is a tendency to interpret such occurrences as evidence of an internal conflict. Adler claims that the conflict actually exists between the individual’s private logic and the common logic, which represents reality. What Adler means is that the individual has two wishes. He wants to have them both satisfied, but they cannot both be fulfilled in reality because they are contradictive in nature. To be precise, the individual wants the gains that the fulfillment of each one of his wishes offers, and he wishes to avoid the losses that come with it. For example, a woman is deliberating whether she should stay married or get a divorce. Actually, she would like to be married and at the same time to be free. She wants the status and the economic advantage that come with marriage, the emotional well-being of the children, and the knowledge that she is not alone in life. Yet she also wants to get rid of her marital commitments and to do whatever she wants, whenever she wants. The root of her problem, in reality, is the contradiction that exists between her two desires.

Her two wishes cannot be achieved simultaneously. One cannot be married and free of commitments at the same time.

When someone is “torn” between two options and deliberates, he says he has an inner conflict, but he *does* what he wants *more*. He does what he prioritizes. What he places second on his list of priorities is expressed by him through thoughts, feelings, and words. These expressions of the unfulfilled desire bridge the gap between what he wants (to satisfy two conflicting wishes) and his inability to fulfill both desires at once. For example, he says, “I feel guilty. I watched television all evening, when I know I should have studied for tomorrow’s class.” In fact, what he wants is both to watch television and to regard himself as a diligent and responsible student. He does not give up on either. He watches television with discomfort. The stronger of the two desires is expressed through his action (watching television). The diligence and responsibility are expressed through his feelings of discomfort and guilt. The result is that he both watches television and feels and appears as a responsible human being. The real conflict is between his desires and the impossibility of achieving both of them in reality at the same time. The conflict is between his private logic and common sense. His personality is not split. It is whole.

Sometimes it is difficult to recognize the line unifying an individual’s actions, words, and feelings. They seem to be turning in different directions. But when one makes an abstraction of the separate, different actions and asks what they have in common, one can find the thread. When we make the abstraction, we discover that there is basically one tune and that every detail of the behavior is but one note, which by itself does not mean anything. The Adlerian therapist’s job is to explore and find the tune and its main theme.

The root of the experience of an “inner” conflict is then, for Adler, striving to achieve two goals that contradict one another in reality, while the individual removes responsibility for his actual choice from himself. As mentioned, we can always recognize what he wants most when looking at what he did. Here is the rule: When you wish to know what a person (or you yourself) really wants, look at what he does.

The holistic principle puts an end to the use of expressions we use to relate to ourselves as if we were two people: “‘I’ tell ‘myself’ that ‘I’ need to lose weight, but ‘I’ can’t stop ‘myself’ from eating.” Who is “I”? And who is “myself”? Talking like this allows one to remove responsibility from “I” (me) and place it on “myself,” whoever that may be. For those of us who agree with Adler’s viewpoint, these excuses aren’t available any more.

3 - Everything is like one drop of blood

The third expression of Holism helps us to explore and reveal the client’s lifestyle from the moment we first meet with him. From a holistic viewpoint, every piece of thought, feeling, speech, and behavior of the individual is an expression of his lifestyle. One of our students used a perfect image for this principle: just as one drop of blood is enough to represent an individual’s full hematologic profile, a small sample of a client’s behavior represents his lifestyle. When one needs a blood test, we do not need to test all of the individual’s blood. We take just a drop. Testing this one drop tells us what there is to know about this person’s blood system. It is the same with an individual’s behavior and his lifestyle. Every action represents the lifestyle. We hear and see the individual. We observe his body language, the words he

uses most, his actions, his early recollections, the partner he has chosen, the way in which he faces the life tasks, these all represent his lifestyle in some way.

A person never “jumps out” of his lifestyle, except for when his lifestyle changes. This, as mentioned, usually only happens due to therapy. Rarely, changes in one’s lifestyle might occur without a therapeutic intervention. Nevertheless, as mentioned, it does happen, if seldom, that lifestyle changes due to a life-threatening occurrence. This is usually triggered by the near death experience of the individual himself or someone close to him. It may be a very clear and vivid experience of the finality of life, or at least an extremely dramatic event, as in the Somerset Maugham story, when in one fatal moment we see a Verticalist choosing to perform an act of social interest, giving up on his elevated social position. Although it is fiction, I will recount to you (the students) the short story “Mr. Know All.” If you are a reader, I recommend you read it (Maugham, 1991)¹².

¹² I decided against including this story in this booklet to save space, but the reader can easily look it up. See the bibliography list.

The subjectivity of perception

I would like to ask you a question. Here we are, sitting together in this classroom. Would each of you please describe, spontaneously, in one word or sentence, what is going on right now in this classroom? (In turn, each student says something different.)

Adler's claim about subjectivity of perception sounds obvious, or at least easy to comprehend. Yet it takes a long time and much life experience and professional experience to deeply understand this principle. Once you understand this principle, you will realize that when Adler emphasized it he pointed at one of the main origins of difficulties in human relations. Fights, conflicts, problems of communication, and failures in collaboration can be explained by neglecting the fact that perception and interpretation of social occurrences are subjective.

As therapists, we all fall into the trap of assuming we understand what the client means by what he says. We assume that his subjective perception is the same as ours. We are wrong. Over time we must learn, again and again, to make use of one of the most important of human inventions: questions. We must ask questions; if we don't, we will not understand others. Here are a few questions that Adlerian therapists find useful:

- That is to say?
- And what does that mean?
- What do you mean?
- How do you feel about it?

If we are to understand our patients, we need to get into the habit of asking these questions.

The extent to which subjective perception influences our mutual understanding of reality depends on the context. There is the least amount of disagreement between people's perceptions when inanimate objects or living creatures are involved. Mentally healthy people usually see a chair where other people see a chair, and they see a dog where others see a dog. When a scientific discovery is accepted as correct, it is because it is possible to reproduce that discovery's proof and for others to perceive it in the same way as the original researchers. These are situations in which subjective interpretation is minimized.

In the appraisal of facts, subjective perception is more involved. When I say to my grandchildren that I parked the car really far away, they laugh. In their eyes, I parked it close by. The difference in our appraisal of the car's distance from us is due to the fact that I really dislike walking. If it were up to me, I would take the car to where it is parked! My grandchildren, however, do not mind walking.

But our topic here is the subjective perception and interpretation of situations in which human relations are involved. These situations are perceived and interpreted differently by each one of us. Two people always describe an occurrence differently, even if they were in the same place at the same time. This is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to know the "truth" about history.

We have already acknowledged that the way we interpret any given situation is influenced by what our goal is in that situation. It is our goal that determines what we will pay attention to, what we will focus

on, what will pop up as a “Gestalt,” and what will remain in the background (to be forgotten) in any situation we face. Our goal also determines if we perceive the situation as positive (bringing us closer to our goal) or as negative (moving us away from our goal). I had a mother-in-law who remembered guests according to only one criterion: Did they eat? What did they eat? How much? Her perception of herself and her sense of her value was associated with her being a warm hostess who always offers a rich food spread to her guests. As she recounted someone’s visit, sometimes many years after, she would sigh and say sadly, “He didn’t eat anything;” “He refused to eat anything.” Other family members’ subjective interpretations and memory of the same visit were probably different, and presumably they remembered details besides how much the guest ate.

The mistake which creates the problem: *subjectivity is perceived as objective truth*

Here is a shortened version of how Professor Eva Dreikurs-Ferguson, Rudolf Dreikurs’ daughter, describes this process in her book *Adlerian Theory: An Introduction*:

The word "apperception" ... is a useful term. When an individual looks at objects or scenes, especially ambiguous ones that are not sharply defined or that have a somewhat fuzzy appearance, two processes are likely to occur. The person perceives the objects or scenes, in ways that are physiologically determined by the visual pathways, and the person interprets what he or she perceives, on the basis of goals, expectations, emotions, and other non-visual processes. The interpretation of perceived events is apperception. The process of apperception occurs in many circumstances, especially in interpersonal situations. Individuals typically do not only perceive the events, but add interpretation to the visual and auditory information. The process of interpretation is very rapid and usually occurs without the person's awareness, so that the individual believes he "saw" events in a certain fashion without realizing how much additional meaning he added to the visual input. In addition to interpreting what is perceived, individuals also selectively attend to and selectively remember what is perceived. Thus in a variety of ways, information regarding objective events is structured and often modified by active, subjective processes (Dreikurs-Ferguson, 1984, p. 13).

When Professor Dreikurs-Ferguson emphasizes that the interpretation process occurs unconsciously, she points to the real problem in human relationships caused by the subjectivity of interpretation. The problem isn’t that perception is subjective. When someone *knows* that his interpretation is subjective, there is no problem. The problem is that, when an individual interprets something subjectively, he believes his perception represents the objective truth. This is how problems evolve; this is how children make mistakes in understanding situations; this is where misunderstandings between people come from; this is why we often fail to find respectable solutions between sides in an argument or fight; this is what interferes with mutual respect.

Adler (in Dreikurs-Ferguson) described the way the personal lifestyle is created by the child:

...from infancy on, the human being forms his reactions and creates his experiences and that through his interpretations, actions, and goals, the child shapes his personality. Adler

pointed out that early family life sets the stage for personality development, but each individual child in the family creates his or her own interpretations and goals, and from these creates the individual life style. Thus, within the framework of each person's heredity and objective environment, the individual in childhood develops a pattern and a scheme for ways to live, to adapt, and to meet life's problems and opportunities. This pattern and scheme is developed through a creative process, on the basis of subjective appraisal and individual decision making (Ibid, p. 13-14).

The first and principal difficulty at the heart of the child's basic mistaken assumptions (which lead him through life) is the subjective interpretation of his reality in his early years. The child, who grows and becomes an adult, lives according to these mistaken assumptions as if they were the objective truth. The child has created a closed system of thought. What does this mean? It means that when faced with information that doesn't seem to fit with his subjective assumptions, the individual still explains the information in a way that suits his assumptions. He does not say, "Oh, I see that I have made a mistake! Things are not at all as I always believed them to be!" Instead, he reacts in the manner shown in the following example.

Someone who assumes "everyone wants to humiliate me and defeat me, therefore I must be strong and invincible," goes to therapy. He notices that the therapist does not try to humiliate him or defeat him. As he is convinced that his assumption is an objective truth, his initial interpretation will not be "I was wrong. There are people who are not out to humiliate and defeat me." Rather, his interpretation might be "He (the therapist) can see who he is dealing with; he understands that he has no chance with me, so he isn't even trying (to humiliate and defeat me)." This is how a subjective, closed system of thought (the lifestyle) endures contradicting impressions.

Lifestyle is a closed system of subjective ideas. This makes it difficult for the individual to deviate from it and understand, for example, that even though everyone in his family of origin wanted to humiliate and defeat others, this isn't always the case, and there are also different kinds of relationships. The personal subjectivity is perceived as the objective and the ultimate truth of all. This is what makes lifestyle so durable and stable. To demonstrate the process, Adlerians use the image of a person whose eye glasses are painted green. He has worn these glasses for as long as he can remember, and he is convinced that the world is green. Ever since he colored his glasses green in his early years, he has not known that this is his subjective perception.

When we explore lifestyle, we try to extricate the client's basic assumptions from information about his childhood. When we make a guess, an assumption, we have methods we use to find out if we are right. We would ask the client in the example above, "Could it be that you think everyone wants to defeat you, and that you need to be on guard to make sure that doesn't happen?" If we are right, the reply will be "Of course. Everyone knows that's how things are, and one needs to be cautious." When he says this, he betrays his belief that his perception represents the objective truth.

During therapy, we search for the sources of the client's basic assumptions. We need to know how he arrived at his mistaken conclusions. This work is done in collaboration with the client. Once we have found the source of the idea, the patient is able to understand that the conclusion that things everywhere

are always as they were in his family is an overgeneralization. Now, as an adult in therapy, he can understand that not all families are like the family he grew up in. Example: He can understand that the therapist is not looking to humiliate him. Thus he feels and thinks the therapist wants the best for him, identifies with him, is empathic towards him, and is happy to encourage him and relieve his distress. He can understand that his perception was subjective and not objective.

The subjectivity of perception: How does it affect human relations?

We said the subjectivity of perception creates difficulties in human relations. This is mainly connected to the subjective perception each one of us has about the conditions that must be fulfilled in order for us to be worthy. Let us look, for example, at couple's relationships. A woman might say to her partner, "It is a pity you said such-and-such to our child. It would have been better had you said such-and-such." He might react angrily and say, "Why do you always have to make such a big issue of everything?!"

What happened here? According to the man's subjective perception, he is "somebody" *only* when he always does the right thing, which means that he can never make a mistake. As a result, he perceives what his wife said to him as "You are worthless. You are nothing." No wonder he has an angry outburst upon hearing what she apparently said. Of course, it is possible that she did intend to humiliate him, and that her subjective understanding is "If I point out his mistakes, it means I am better than him, and that makes me feel valuable." In other words, "Only when I point out his mistakes do I not feel inferior next to him." In this case, her subjective perception "steps on the foot" of his subjective perception, and they undoubtedly fight a lot. However, it is also possible that she just wanted to share her thoughts about the child's education with his father, but the father subjectively interpreted the comment as humiliation and started a fight. A subjective misperception often causes trouble in relationships.

When people learn to recognize that their opinions, views, and desires are subjective and hold exactly the same value as those of another, their quality of life and their relationships tend to improve. This knowledge entails the assumption of social equality and therefore the logic of mutual respect. There is no one who is the keeper of truth because there is no single truth. There is not one correct worldview all people must follow. It is not you or me who is wrong; rather, I see it this way, and you see it differently, and there is no one to tell us who is right. Who is right is not important. The conditions under which people can live in harmony are important. We better find a way to get along with our different perceptions, a way that will suit both of us.

Until the Messiah comes and tells us what is right and what is wrong, who is right and who is wrong, who is "being subjective" (which is what we blame the other for being), and who is "being objective" (me, of course), until then we will not know, as there is no one above to decide. This is what leads us to democracy.

Because no one has yet found a method for determining what is correct, who is right, there is no method to say who should be the one to make the decisions. There was once a suggestion that the cleverest person should be the one, meaning he should be king. He will decide what is to be done. This reasonable sounding suggestion leaves us with the question of who will determine who the cleverest person is. We should not be surprised to discover that when Plato suggested this, he said he believed the cleverest

person was a philosopher; therefore, a philosopher should be the ruler. This suggestion was rejected by humanity. The impossibility of determining who is right leaves democracy alone as the only possible system of government.

And in therapy

A therapist should always remember that since interpretation, every interpretation is subjective, this includes his own interpretation. Therefore, when a patient says something or relays facts, the therapist must never assume that the meaning he (the therapist) ascribes to these facts is the same as the meaning the client ascribes to them. We must always ask, or else we may be totally wrong.

It is unbelievably difficult to internalize this principle. In my experience, therapists frequently are not aware of their subjectivity. They come to supervision and tell the supervisor things the patient told them, and when they are asked, “What did he mean by it?” or, “what does this mean to him (the patient)?” they reply, “I didn’t ask.” They didn’t ask because they automatically assumed that the meaning they ascribed to the story with their own subjective processing is the same meaning the patient ascribed to the story. This is why they did not see the need to ask. The patient does not see the need to explain what he means because he, too, is sure that his understanding of the situation is objective and obvious, and therefore common to all people, including the therapist.

I recently experienced an incident that can serve as an example. A female patient who is very keen on being in a coupled relationship told me about a date she had with a particular man. She said that she immediately understood that continuing to date this man was out of the question. She said, “Imagine, before he got divorced he lived in...” Here she mentioned the name of a town with a below average socioeconomic rating. She thought it was obvious to me, too, that this fact meant it was out of the question for her to consider that man as a suitable candidate. When she answered my questions, it became apparent that, according to her subjective perception, a potential partner has to come from a high socioeconomic background, or else she would lose her high social status.

A woman who tells us that she has been widowed recently might mean that she has finally been relieved of the heavy burden of that terrible man she was married to, and that at long last “she can live her own life.” A therapist who assumes that she is miserable and therefore comforts her might damage his therapeutic relationship with her. Following his reaction, she might feel uncomfortable to tell him that, in fact, she is happy now that her husband is gone, that she can start a new life. She might feel that she cannot talk about her feelings of happiness in therapy.

As surprising as it may seem, the same goes for sexual harassment (yet not by parents or siblings, and not when penetration was involved). During one of our demonstrations in class, we had a woman who spoke about an uncle who messed around with her in her childhood. When I asked her (to the dismay of the students) how she felt about it, she said she felt special, and that it raised her status compared to that of her sisters because, as she saw it then, out of all of them, her uncle chose her.

Communication rules

It is due to the subjectivity of perception that we need communication between humans. It means that we cannot assume that everyone sees a situation in the same way. When each individual is sure that his perception represents the objective truth, yet his perception differs from that of the other, conflicts arise. This calls for three rules for those striving towards harmonious relationships:

- 1- Each individual must express his thoughts clearly and present them as his point of view, not as the absolute truth. For example, “The way I see it is...”
- 2- Never assume that the other sees things like I do, and therefore:
- 3- The ingenious invention of syntax: ask questions.

In every good relationship, we find many consultations, questions, and attempts to understand the viewpoint of the other.

And now for the amusing part: the objective truth according to Adler

Every philosophy has its built-in contradiction. Adler’s theory is no exception. It contains a contradiction. If no one knows the truth, then no one knows what is right. If no one knows which viewpoint is better than the other, then how can Adler know “the truth”? Adler was convinced there are some truths that are absolutely necessary in our lives. These truths are what he called “the iron logic of communal life.” He said:

... We must regard the inherent rules of the game of a group as these emerge within the limited organization of the human body and its achievements, as if they were an absolute truth (Adler, 1967, p. 128).

Note that Adler does say “as if.” He knows that his view is as subjective as anybody else’s (although he is sure it is the truth).

The truth according to Adler includes:

- The assumption of social equality between human beings (no one is inferior; no one is superior)
- Therefore, the need for mutual respect between them
- Therefore, the lack of right and possibility of humans to control each other on a long-term basis (the oppressed will always eventually revolt)
- The need for behavior guided by social interest
- The need for people to cooperate
- Everything derived from these assumptions

Some of these formulations appear in Adler’s writings only implicitly, and it was Dreikurs who made them explicit.

What is all of this based upon? Are these assumptions Adler’s subjective perception of social life? We may ask him: How is it that of all people, you are the one who knows the objective truth? Adler was

convinced that his theory represents the social reality and the human condition, but what gives these truths their validity?

Adler, of course, was aware of this question, and he answered it. We shall finish this chapter on subjectivity with his words:

Everyone subordinates all experiences and problems to his own conception. This conception is usually a tacit assumption and as such unknown to the person. Yet he lives and dies for the inferences he draws from such a conception. It is amusing, and sad at the same time, to see how even scientists—especially philosophers, sociologists and psychologists—are caught in this net. In that it also has its assumptions, its conception of life, its style of life, Individual Psychology is no exception. But it differs in that it is well aware of this fact (Adler, 1979. p. 24).

A human being is a social being that cannot exist without society and without social interest

Human survival is possible only within a social framework

Here is what Adler's truth is based on.

Adler was influenced by Darwin and believed that man is born into the flow of evolution, equipped like all creatures with a “life force.” Like all living creatures, humans strive to maintain their existence and continue it. To achieve this, humans must cope with the world into which they are born and adapt to its demands, otherwise humanity will become extinct.

Humans can only fulfill this task within society. Darwin noted that, in nature, weak animals do not live alone. Weak animals always live in groups. Based on this, Adler said that since humans are among the weakest creatures found in nature, humans cannot survive alone. As for the continuation of his species, needless to say, no human can do this by himself. Humans need shelter, food, and clothing. No one can take care of this by himself. From the dawn of humanity until the present day, it has been impossible for one person to take care of all of his needs, says Adler.

From the point of view of nature, man is an inferior being. But this inferiority with which he is afflicted, and of which he becomes aware through a feeling of deprivation and insecurity, acts as a continuous stimulus to find a way of adjusting, of providing, of creating situations in which the disadvantages of his position seem compensated (Adler, 1967, p.129).

Note that the term “inferiority feeling” appears here in the positive sense. Adler frames it as a motivating force that pushes us to find ways to adjust. Yet, in another context (as mentioned above), Adler used the same term “inferiority feeling”, in the negative sense, meaning the feeling of a person who perceives himself as worth less than others. This kind of inferiority feeling is connected with misery and tends to enhance the self-centeredness and competitive behavior accompanied by underdeveloped social interest, whereas the first sense of the same term stands for a force that enhances cooperative behavior and social contribution, in short, social interest.

As the heading says, coping with existential problems is possible for human beings only within a social framework. “Therefore, the existential structure of the human creature is sociability,” Adler writes (Adler, 2010, p. 23). What enables a human’s existence is the social group, the family, the small community, the country, and the entire human community, past and present.

It follows, then, that the universal goal man strives towards is to know he has a safe place in the group, to know that he *belongs* to it, and that he is a significant and inseparable part of it. For a human being, belonging to the group is equivalent to existing.

For society to fulfill its purpose, two conditions must be met. There must be a division of labor, and there must be cooperation.

“The division of labor alone is what provided man with weapons for protection and assault, just like everything else he needed to take care of himself, everything which today we would refer to as culture” (Adler, 2010, p. 23).

An exercise: How many people were involved in the work that was necessary to enable us to sit in this classroom and study? The answer to this question will lead us through an infinite list of people, including he who invented the wheel.

Therefore, says Adler, since the creation of man, we are all part of a huge web covering the entire human race, and we live our lives based on the contribution of whoever was here before us and did something in human history. “What we find when we enter our life is always the contribution of our forebears” (Adler, 1979, p. 35).

What do we find when we are born into this world? The answer is: We find all the previous useful contributions which have been supplied by our forebears. We find human beings in their bodily and mental development, social institutions, art, science, lasting traditions, social relations, values, schooling, etc. We receive all these and build upon them, advancing, improving, and changing... This is the inheritance from our forebears... It is their contribution in which their spirit lives on immortally after the body has fallen (Adler, 1979, p. 26-27).

It should be borne in mind that the legacy of humanity rests on more than just those people who contributed outstanding inventions. We are also talking about the shoemaker who made shoes for the inventor, as well as the tailor who made the shoemaker’s clothes. Whoever works contributes in some way, according to his skills and aspirations, and in return he receives the means for his existence. And so it is, through the division of labor and cooperation, that man survives.

When someone makes shoes, someone else needs him, and he has the right to receive living expenses and all the advantages of hygiene and good education for his children. The fact that he receives payment is an acknowledgement of being helpful and useful (Adler, 1933, p. 3).

Whoever contributes to the general needs while actualizing his own abilities enjoys being useful and needed. He feels he has a place and belongs to the human community. Whoever acts in a way that contributes to the general good acts with social interest. This is the reason why we place great importance on the individual’s functioning in the life task of “work.”

The organ given to man for survival, adaptation, and development is not subject to the senses.

How are division of labor and cooperation carried out? Every living creature was given tools for survival and for a satisfactory existence. What tools did evolution give man for these purposes? According to Adler, evolution provided man with “the mental organ.” This is the mind, consciousness, awareness, the human organ that cannot be perceived through our senses. This organ determines and chooses how the human system functions. It is able to do this thanks to its abilities. First of all, this organ has a perception of temporality. It remembers the past and can plan the future. “... Our psyche steps beyond the present,

that is, temporally beyond the limits of primitive drive satisfaction” (Adler, 1967, p. 65). The other essential ability of the mental organ is the ability to create and use language. We will get to it.

Adler’s theory is *cognitive*. This means that thoughts, understanding, the creation of ideas, planning for the future, as well as values, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, aspirations, and hopes are the factors that direct man’s behavior. It is not biological, physical, or chemical data. It is not reasons or scientific determinism. All of these are none other than influences and probabilities. The mental organ, the psychological organ, is the decision maker, the planner, the chooser, and the creator.

Cognition has a social structure

According to the principle of evolution, and like all other organs, the mental organ has the necessary structure for human survival, for growing, for facing life tasks, and for overcoming obstacles. What is the structure necessary for human survival? We already noted that man can survive only within a social framework, therefore Adler explains:

The psychological organ had from the beginning to reckon with the conditions of society. All its abilities are developed on a basis which embodies the component of a social life. Every human thought had to be so constituted that it could do justice to a community (Ibid, p.129).

What does it mean that the psychological organ has to be adapted to the community? It means that it has the ability to cooperate. As we have said, human existence requires both cooperation and division of labor. For this purpose, the human psychological organ comes with the necessary ability required for cooperation. It is the ability for language acquisition, without which there could be no cooperation. Just think of what happened to the Tower of Babylon when they had no common language. Think of the attempt to build a building reaching the sky without verbal communication between the construction workers. Adler explains the importance and significance of language:

Language has deep significance particularly for the development of human psychological life. Logical reasoning is possible only when we assume the existence of language. As language allows us conceptualization, it allows us to make distinctions and create constructs that are not private, but shared. We can understand our thoughts and feelings only when assuming general validity (...) This is how we arrive at the conclusion that the constructs of wisdom, reason, morality (ethics) and aesthetics, could only be formed in human social life, and that they are the cement defending culture from falling apart (Adler, 1947, p 22-23).

The capabilities of temporality, language, and the creation of common concepts enable human social life, cooperation, and division of labor. Adler says that these facilities make the conditions necessary for the existence of human society:

If the conditions of life are determined in the first instance by cosmic influences, they are in the second instance determined socially. They are determined by the fact that men live together and by the rules and regularities which spontaneously arise in consequence of this.

The demands of society have regulated human relations which had already existed from the beginning as self-understood, as an absolute truth. For before the individual life of man there was the community. In the history of human culture, there is not a single form of life which was not conducted as social. Never has man appeared otherwise than in society [...] The demands made on man by communal life are really just as self-evident as the demands of climate, the demands of protection against cold, and of building houses (Adler, 1967, p. 128).

Think about it:

Language is an unnecessary creation for someone who lives alone. Morality, what we call the positive aspect of human character, is none other than collaborative behavior based on rules that have emerged from the needs of social life. Reason is based on general validity and is intended to achieve it. Love, work and friendship are the concrete requirements of human communal life (Adler, 1974, p. 16).

Adlerian truth

And so, according to Adler, the only possible truth is the social demands, social agreements, and ways of thinking that enable collaboration.

We already discussed Adler's absolute truth when dealing with the subjectivity of perception. I hope the basis for Adler's belief that the "iron logic of social life" is not a subjective concept but in fact the correct idea, the "objective truth," is clearer to you now. Overall, the explanation is simple. Without this logic, says Adler, human society would have become extinct like many species became extinct because they could not cope with the conditions of cosmic requirements (again Darwin).

What does this mean for us as therapists?

It follows from all of this that every psychological event (of consciousness) is, according to Adler and without exception, of social significance. I emphasize this sentence because, according to Adler, we as therapists must never forget it. Any mental occurrence, including any symptom, is never really "between man and himself," even if it is a personal experience. Our job during the therapeutic process is to understand how the client's thoughts, aspirations, feelings, and behavior are related to the social environment.

An exercise: You are invited to search for a thought, feeling, wish, or decision that is not related in any way to others, real or imagined, and has no influence on others.

Behavior according to social interest is necessary

Now we come to the idea at the pinnacle of Adler's theory. We've said that a human being must live in a society that operates with division of labor and cooperation so that he can exist. But this in and of itself is not enough. There is another condition that must be fulfilled in order for this existence to be successful

and prosperous: behavior must be motivated by social interest. Imagine, for just a moment, something absurd: A prehistoric man wanted to move something heavy, say an object or animal, from one place to another. He looked for something like a board, put the heavy object on it and tried to push or pull it. When it was difficult and he didn't manage, he thought of putting a round object under the board and found that it was easier to move the object around this way. He succeeded. Yet he did not act with social interest; he did not reveal his excellent solution for moving objects from place to place to anyone.

Sometime later, someone else faced the same challenge and had to go through the whole process himself. He may have placed his object on a flat board; maybe he even thought of putting something round under it, maybe he didn't; and so on and so forth. I believe the idea is clear. If humans did not act with social interest, that is to say, if they didn't contribute the fruits of their ideas and their work to society, humanity would not have developed, and eventually it would not have survived.

Therefore, the idea Adler developed in the aftermath of World War I which towards the end of his life he considered the most important thing, was that humans should act according to the demands of social interest. This means that they must act according to the needs and requirements of the self, the other(s), and the situation (not necessarily in that order) (Dreikurs-Ferguson, 2008).

I choose to call this principle "Adler's theory of morality." (Abramson, 2012, p. 238-248). It is a moral theory that has no universal rules. This means there are no rules that always apply to everyone. Instead, it imposes on the individual the responsibility to consider and choose in any given situation the behavior that meets the changing needs of the self, the other(s), and the situation, according to the relative weight and priority of these factors.

The criteria or goals of those who act according to social interest will be contribution and usefulness, enjoyment and satisfaction, development, wellbeing, and progress for all. Their goals will never direct them towards winning a competition or gaining superiority of any kind. Adler wrote about the benchmarks for useful behavior:

What we call justice, and we see as the positive side of human nature, is none other than the fulfillment of demands that have emerged from social life. These are the requirements that shaped the psychological organ. Responsibility, loyalty and honesty are actually requirements that have been imposed and maintained by a principle of general validity of the community. What we call a good or bad character can only be judged from a community perspective. Character, just like scientific, political or artistic achievements, will prove its greatness and value only if it is of value to human beings in general (Adler, 1947, p 23-24).

Social interest behavior does not appear on its own

We established the fact that for the sake of the existence of the human race, rules of cooperation, coordination, mutuality, mutual respect, justice, and caring are necessary and are used. Actions that include contribution and giving to others are required. Is behavior according to these rules inherent to the mental organ? Is such behavior innate? Adler says: yes, as a potential. Does it develop in every person the way one develops, for example, the ability to walk? Adler says no, it needs cultivating.

We remember the principle of freedom of self-choice. This principle also applies to social interest behavior. Man is free to choose if and when to act with social interest. Some act according to social interest frequently, and others do so less frequently. Adler talks of “well-developed social interest” as opposed to “poorly-developed social interest.” The level of development of social interest in the individual is an integral part of the individual’s lifestyle, and it corresponds to his level of mental health.

How do differences in the development of social interest in individuals and their consequent behaviors come about? Like other lifestyle components, they are influenced (though not determined) by factors of the childhood environment. Adler argues that every baby who comes into the world has the innate potential to develop social interest, but in order for this potential to develop, an environment that nurtures and strengthens it is needed. During Adler’s time, there were no contemporary linguistic theories, but today, when they do exist, Professor Eva Dreikurs-Ferguson (1995) uses the development of language as an example to illustrate the idea: Every child has the potential to learn and develop language skills, but a child no one spoke to in his childhood will not develop language skills.

Adler, Dreikurs, Ahi Yotam, and many other Adlerians invested huge efforts in the field of parental guidance. Their intent was to help parents nurture their children’s potential to develop social interest. This development occurs in growing social circles. It begins with the relationship between the child and his mother (the attachment process), wherein a social sentiment towards her will appear. This sentiment expands to include, depending on the development of lifestyle, the rest of the family, the neighborhood, friends, teachers, people in the local community. Ultimately, Adler hoped, this social feeling will grow to allow the individual to relate to all of humanity forever after.

This is what Adler said a few months before his unexpected death:

Our criterion for appraising a specific variant, whether a given individual or a group, is always the direction towards the ascending development and welfare of mankind. In other words, it is the degree and kind of social interest necessary to arrive at this goal of general welfare and upward development... The individual is faced exclusively with such problems as can be solved only with sufficient social interest. He may have had this from childhood, or may have acquired it later... One finds a degree of social interest, although this is usually inadequate, in all men, with the exception of idiots, and even in animals. We therefore feel justified in assuming that this social interest which is demonstrated throughout life is rooted in the germ cell. But it is rooted as a potentiality, not as an actual ability (Adler, 1979. p. 25).

And one last comment: The assumption of social equality is a prerequisite for social interest

You may ask: and what about someone who acts with social interest within his group but displays hostility, aggression, and violence towards other groups? Here’s the thing: Acting according to social interest requires an assumption of social equality between people, otherwise it is meaningless. Therefore, when social interest is directed only towards members of a certain group, a group looking to defeat, overcome, control, or patronize another group, it is not social interest. In this case, it represents a manipulated effort to achieve a goal contradictory to social interest.

This raises the question about the assumption of social equality, but we will leave that for other occasions (Abramson, 2018; Abramson, 2009; Abramson, 2011).



Here is a shocking example illustrating the principles of Adler's theory. At the beginning of the Second World War, on September 3rd 1939, two days after the German invasion of Poland, the Poles executed this group of Germans.

Six men stand waiting for their execution. *Prima facie*, what free choice do they have? Yet each of them reacts differently. Each one chooses to react according to his lifestyle. Each one reacts according to his own private logic, in keeping with his interpretation of the situation. This interpretation is based on his subjective perception of himself, his social life, and that which gives him a sense of value and belonging.

Each one is free to choose his reaction, as is always the case, even in this tragic situation. According to Adler, factual data never bring about specific responses; never determine them. It is the individual himself who generates the response no matter what. Indeed, in the photograph, one can see, from left to right, that the first man suffers anguish and shows it, the second man reveals a kind of demonstration of power ("You can kill me, but you will not defeat me"), and the third man? the third man is smiling! The fourth seems to have a stoic acceptance of the situation, while the fifth seems to submit to it. The sixth does not hide.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Zivit Abramson is a psychologist as well as an individual, couples and family therapist and supervisor. For the past 12 years, she has been, and still is, a senior lecturer in the program for Adlerian Psychotherapy at the Alfred Adler Institute of Israel. The lectures in this book are part of her teachings in that program.

Dr. Abramson has written books, papers and articles, all of them from an Adlerian perspective. For years, she has also written counseling columns in different papers. She had her own television show and radio program. Dr. Abramson has been on the faculty of ICASSI for about 30 years. She is also frequently invited to give workshops in many countries around the world.