An Expansion of Positive Psychology’s Explanation of the Full Life:

Consideration of the Adlerian Concept of Social Interest

Michelin Hegland

Adler Graduate School
Abstract

Positive psychology and Adlerian psychology have much in common. Both are encouraging approaches focused on meaning, human strengths, and flourishing. Social interest, commonly defined as a connection with and concern for the welfare of others, is at the foundation of Adlerian psychology and is the barometer of mental health. Until now, positive psychology has not given due consideration to the variable of social interest. This paper explores the ways in which social interest can enrich and expand positive psychology’s explanation of the full life.
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Positive psychology has changed the landscape of our approach to mental health, shifting from a pathology-oriented field to one increasingly focused on well-being. Alfred Adler revolutionized the field in a similar manner though much less recognized way in the early twentieth century. This paper reviews Adler’s concept of social interest, commonly defined as a connection with and concern for the welfare of others, and explores how social interest can contribute to positive psychology’s explanation of the full life.

Adlerian Psychology

Adler began his career at a time when humankind was seen as self-centered, neurotic and abnormal (Ansbacher, 1978). In his lifetime, Adler shifted his focus from the abnormal to the normal, from deficit to strength, from a self-centered concept of humankind to one of broad self-transcendence (Ansbacher, 1978). Individual psychology developed a practical and positive idea of mental health in contrast to Freud’s reductionist theory of mental functioning (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979). Adler was one of the first in the field of psychology to recognize the need to account for healthy functioning (1979).

The term “Individual Psychology” is often misunderstood to mean the psychology of a person as an individual, set apart from others. Adler coined the term to signify that a person cannot be divided into parts as Freud suggested with the id, ego, and superego. One assumption of Individual Psychology is the holism and self-consistency of the personality: an individual is an indivisible, unified being, and does not have conflicting dynamic forces at work (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979). From this point forward in this paper, the school of thought pioneered by Adler is be referred to by its popularized name, Adlerian psychology.
As an optimistic perspective with a generous view of humankind, Adler’s work became known as a holistic growth model rooted in the social context (Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2006). Adler stated that his was “probably the most consistent theory of the attitude of the individual to the problems of social living and in this sense, a social psychology” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 128).

Central concepts of Adlerian psychology include the holism of the individual, the importance of social context, goal orientation, and self-determination and uniqueness. At the foundation of Adlerian psychology are a striving for superiority or improvement (of oneself or one’s situation) and social interest.

Adlerian psychology shares many ideas in common with positive psychology, such as a base of wellness and normality rather than illness, emphasis on strengths and improvement, focus on achieving and maintaining mental health, and a generally positive outlook and optimistic view of humankind. Both stress things that make life worthwhile and psychologically healthy, and both see strengths as buffers against pathology (Carlson et al., 2006).

One major difference between the two is that the work of positive psychology has focused on the individual, with a compartmentalized, scientific, and cross-sectional approach, while Adlerian psychology emphasizes the social context, keeping in mind a developmental perspective, and the holism of the individual.

**Role of Social Interest within Adlerian Psychology**

In his writing, Adler seemed to indicate that social interest serves several functions: a framework for moral judgment, a basis for human meaningfulness, and a foundation for mental health (Bickhard & Ford, 1976). Social interest is most often discussed in terms of how an individual functions within a social context, especially as related to adjustment or mental health.
According to Adler, “social interest is the main characteristic of each person and is involved in all of his actions” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 28).

Adler and many of his followers suggest that social interest is a requirement for mental health. For some, it is at the same time a cause and an effect of healthy functioning (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Crandall (1980) suggests that a lack of social interest is one causal factor in psychopathology. Others (Bickhard & Ford, 1976) point out that social interest neither causes nor explains mental health, but is a partial definition describing what mental health is.

Explanation of Social Interest

In order to achieve a better understanding of the richness and complexity of social interest, its history is reviewed, its object and process dimensions explored, and the ideal and interpersonal forms with its various manifestations explained. The development of social interest and its impact on well-being is then discussed to prepare for an exploration of the ways in which social interest enriches and expands positive psychology.

History

Adler’s writing spanned four decades, from 1898 until his death in 1937. His view of human nature changed over time, and the concept of social interest grew as Adler’s view of humankind became more optimistic (Ansbacher, 1978). Trained as a medical doctor, his early writings discussed physiology, social medicine, and the problems of education rather than psychology.

Adler became a charter member of a discussion group formed by Sigmund Freud in 1902, and Adler’s writing at that time explored Freud’s causalistic drive psychology. In 1911, Adler parted from Freud, developing a holistic, goal-oriented value psychology which gradually shifted to a more optimistic view of human nature. In 1912, Adler introduced the term Individual
Psychology to describe his school of thought, emphasizing the holism and “indivisibility” of the person (Ansbacher, 1978). Adler sought to understand the individual’s subjective, goal-oriented striving rather than looking for an objective cause in one’s past as Freud had done.

The idea of social interest first began with a revision of Adler’s paper “The Need for Affection” published in 1914, in which he used Gemeinschaftsgefühle, the plural “social feelings” (Ansbacher, 1978). A related term, Gemeinsinn, translated as “social sense,” was introduced around the same time, as Adler discussed the importance of “advancement of the social sense” and described “problem children” as demonstrating “lack of social sense” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 128).

Ansbacher (1978) delineated Adler’s writing about social interest into two distinct phases: The first (1918-1927) explained social interest as an innate counterforce and the second (1928-1937) saw social interest as a cognitive function. In phase I, the personality dynamic was seen as one of inner conflict in which social interest, directing ethical, socially constructive behavior, was “throttled by the will to power” (Ansbacher, 1978). In phase 2, social interest appeared as a cognitive function to be consciously developed.

Adler’s first written use of Gemeinschaftsgefühl was in an article entitled “Bolshevism and Psychology,” which in 1918 denounced the Bolshevist Revolution (Ansbacher, 1978). In that article, social interest acted as a counterforce to the striving for power on a larger scale. In Adler’s view, the only solution to the injustice was “the miracle of social interest,” which “[would] never succeed through the use of power” (as cited in Ansbacher, 1978, p. 129).

The term became so important to his theory that Adler added it to earlier writings starting in 1919 (Ansbacher, 1978). In revising one paper, originally published in 1908, Adler explains the role of social interest in mediating the striving for superiority of the aggression drive:
“Gemeinschaftsgefühl which is innate to man must be regarded as the most important regulator of the aggression drive. It is the basis of any relationship of the child and signifies the cohesion with our life, the affirmation, the conciliation with it. Through Gemeinschaftsgefühl … acting together with the aggression drive, there comes about the general attitude a person takes, which actually constitutes his psychological life. (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 30)

In the second phase, Adler discussed social interest as a cognitive function guiding goal-oriented striving, rather than an innate counterforce. Failures were no longer due to a “throttling” of social interest in opposition to self-interest, but rather to its underdevelopment or lack (Ansbacher, 1978). This view is more compatible with the holistic tenet of Adlerian psychology.

The mature concept of social interest was introduced around 1927. The criterion for normality was striving with a well-developed social interest. Ansbacher (1978) discussed neurotics as being:

concerned with their own self-esteem and personal power over others, while the normal individual is more concerned with gaining satisfaction by overcoming difficulties that are considered as such by others as well. The normal goal of superiority includes the welfare of others – it is on the socially useful side – whereas the abnormal goal is socially useless or harmful. (p. 126)

Of the origin of social interest Adler states: “Social interest is not inborn but is an innate potentiality which has to be consciously developed. We are unable to trust any so-called ‘instinct’” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 133). As an aptitude for a cognitive function, social interest, when developed, becomes an ability for connecting with others and cooperating on the socially useful side of life.
In the final decade of his life, Adler created through social interest a “constructive description of the ideal human norm as a unified, self-consistent, confident individual, feeling and acting as a fellow human being, and striving for successes that are in harmony with the evolutionary tendency of the world” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 138).

**Difficulties with the Concept**

While social interest is one of the most important tenets of Adlerian psychology, it is also one of the most misunderstood. It is a multi-layered concept that is difficult to define. The challenges of translation and changes in meaning from Adler’s original formulation have already been discussed. The richness and complexity of the mature concept, with corresponding affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects, also adds confusion.

Manaster, Cemalcilar, and Knill (2003) noted dissatisfaction with social interest as merely an attitude or trait: “These attitudes, values, and traits of social interest are to social interest as the customs and artifacts of a culture are to culture” and thus makes the definition of social interest difficult in the way defining a culture is difficult (p. 112). Mosak (1991) suggested that social interest be treated as a hypothetical construct, as a “surplus meaning” beyond the common interpersonal definitions, similar to the ideal, communitarian social interest proposed by Manaster et al.

O’Connell (1965) offered the term “humanistic identification” in place of social interest because “interest appears too mild, volitional and intellectual; social too narrow, compliant and tethered by conventions and mores” (p. 44). Though humanistic identification was traditionally limited to human social relationships, it includes the affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of the optimal relationship with others (Ansbacher, 1968).
The way social interest has been studied is similar to the parable of the blind men and the elephant, in which several blind men touch different parts of an elephant and use the characteristics of the tusk, ears, tail, and so on to describe the entire animal. Several have explained social interest as empathy, some as cooperative behavior, and still others as a concern for the welfare of others. Social interest is all of these things. As Bickhard and Ford (1976) declare, social interest is “not a single concept, but a complex of concepts” (p. 27).

In an effort to increase understanding about social interest and how it may become meaningful for the field of positive psychology, the dimensions and forms of social interest will be discussed. First, as suggested by Ansbacher (1968), the term social interest has two dimensions: social, which is the object toward which the interest is directed, and interest, which is a psychological process.

Object Dimension

Though the term social interest is most often limited to interactions with other human beings, Adler extended the use of social to include inanimate objects. Nearly all things can be the focus of social interest, as it:

- touches not only the members of [the individual’s] own family, but also his clan, his nation, and finally, the whole of humanity. It is possible that it may extend beyond these boundaries and express itself toward animals, plants, lifeless objects, or finally towards the whole cosmos” (as cited in Ansbacher, 1968, p. 31).

Adlerian writers such as Wexberg emphasized the extension of social interest to anything with which one can transcend oneself, asserting that:
to cross the boundaries of one’s self only with regard to human beings is not possible.

One who is ready to extend himself will also be able to forget himself in nature and art.

In the end there exists Gemeinschaft also with things. (as cited in Ansbacher, 1968, p. 32)

The German term Gemeinschaft goes beyond the meaning of “social,” resulting in various other translations such as “community feeling,” “community sense,” or communal feeling” (Ansbacher, 1968). It has been noted that Adler chose to use Gemeinschaftsgefühl and not Gesellschaftsgefühl: feeling for “community” in an informal, noninstitutional sense, rather than a feeling for “society” in a formal, structural, and organized sense (Bickhard & Ford, 1976).

Ansbacher (1968) asserted that “true social interest is that which is in the interests of mankind, or, in short, it is an ‘interest in the interests of mankind’” (p. 36). In a discussion of interests or values, it is important to examine the nature of human beings. Are we individuals with social traits, or are we inherently social beings? Are individuals striving for the ideal person as an individual human being (“person-as-human”), or as the ideal interpersonal being (“person-as-socius”)?

In a critical examination of social interest, Bickhard and Ford (1976) examined the question of person-as-human, including interpersonal capacities on par with other characteristics, versus person-as-socius. While the authors pointed to some apparent contradictions in the functions Adler attributed to social interest, representing person-as-human, and the nature of social interest, indicating person-as-socius, the latter (person-as-socius) was chosen as the most appropriate view. Rather than living as discrete individuals in social environments, humans are inherently social beings possessing unique traits, personal creativity, and free will.

The social nature of human beings was one of Adler’s major differences with Freud, along with the unity of the individual and optimistic view (Ansbacher, 1978). Wolfgang
Metzger, an editor of Adler’s works, suggested that Adler’s 1908 article “The Child’s Need for Affection” was “the first clear pronouncement that man is born a social creature, designed to live and work together with others” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 122).

The importance of the social context in Adlerian psychology cannot be overstated, as human beings are socially embedded and cannot be considered outside of their social environments. As with character traits and virtues that depend on it, “social interest can come to life only in the social context” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 134). Social interest can be experienced only if an individual has a sense of relatedness to others and sees himself or herself as a part of the whole. Adler further asserts that all problems arise from the tasks of social living, and that “life presents only such problems as require ability to cooperate for their solution” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 136).

In summary, anything beyond oneself can be the object of social interest. It “means a striving for a form of community” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 34), and further, that “the individual [can never] be the goal of the ideal of perfection, but only mankind as a cooperating community” (p. 40). Adler and his followers sought to promote the process of social interest in its myriad forms.

**Process dimension**

What we call an object of social interest, identifying it as an “interest in the interests of mankind,” rather than being identified with a static object, becomes a life process, a dynamic merging of one’s interests with those of others.

Social interest exists on two levels: first, the ideal communitarian form that directs striving toward the ideal form of community in which humankind has reached perfection; and
second, what will be called the interpersonal form, which describes functioning on the individual and interpersonal level (Manaster et al., 2003).

While these processes are described separately, they are necessarily interconnected. Returning to the metaphor of the blind men and the elephant, the ideal communitarian social interest is the whole elephant and its overall movement; the interconnected parts that the blind men describe as distinct objects are each unique and essential features that make up the elephant and contribute to its movement. As Adler quotes pathologist and social reformer Rudolph Virchow: “the individual becomes a self-consistent Gemeinschaft in which all parts cooperate for a similar purpose” (as cited in Ansbacher, 1968, p. 31).

**Ideal Communitarian Social Interest**

The ideal communitarian form of social interest involves several related aspects working together. It suggests a goal of forward movement in evolution toward the perfection of humankind, as viewed from the aspect of eternity (Dreikurs, 1950). This higher goal inspires and is moved by interpersonal forms of social interest.

**Improvement.** Improvement, or adding value to the world, is a component of ideal communitarian social interest: “The most sensible estimate of the value of any activity is its helpfulness to all humanity, present and future” (Adler as cited in Ansbacher, 1978, p. 136). Adler further stated that individual or group contributions “can for us pass as valuable only if it creates values for eternity, for the higher development of all mankind” (Adler as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 36). Social interest implies the higher development of all humankind, for all time.

Human beings are inclined toward progress and are motivated by feelings of inferiority, moving through life in a way that “leads from a minus to a plus situation” (Adler, 1964, p. 37).
Adler recognized this human striving and growth motivation as primary: “... there is something inherent which is part and parcel of life itself, a struggle, an urge, a self-development, a something without which life cannot be conceived. To live means to develop oneself” (1964, p. 269).

**Individual life direction.** An overall life direction of the individual is manifested in ideal communitarian social interest: “Each individual adopts for himself at the beginning of his life, a law of movement, with comparative freedom to utilize for this his innate capacities and defects, as well as the first impressions of his environment” (Adler, 1964, p. 37). Ideal communitarian social interest is an unattainable ideal “since all of human life and the history of mankind are seen as a great becoming.” In addition, “it is for orientation purposes necessary to have a grand over-all direction-giving point” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. p. 42).

Social interest guides individual striving in a socially useful direction, like a compass pointing north: “Our idea of social feeling as the final form of humanity… is a regulative ideal, a goal that gives us our direction” (Adler, 1964, p. 276). While perfection itself, like “true north,” is difficult to describe and impossible to reach, individuals have the ability to move incrementally closer, to move toward the right direction in their own lives: “None of us knows which is the only right path to follow. Mankind has made many attempts to imagine this final goal of human evolution” (p. 273). Adler suggests that “as a direction-giving factor, social interest also becomes a normative ideal” to guide individual development, as well as the larger evolution of humankind (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 30).

**Evolution of humankind.** Adler (1964) equated the goal of ideal communitarian social interest with evolution, asserting that the goal is not the perfection of the individual, but for one that “stands for an ideal society, amongst all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of evolution” (p.
Adler went so far as to say that “the indestructible destiny of the human species is social interest …. Man is inclined toward social interest, toward the good” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 134).

Emphasizing that contributions of individuals or groups are only meaningful when humankind gains evolutionary value, Adler asks,

What happens to those persons who have contributed nothing? They have disappeared, have become extinct. There you see again how the force of evolution, how this urge to achieve a higher stage physically and mentally, how this urge extinguishes everything which does not go along and contributes nothing . . . . There is a basic law in development which calls to those who are negating: Away with you; you do not understand what counts! Thus duration emphasizes itself, the eternal duration of the contribution of persons who have done something for the common good. (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 36)

Ideal social interest contributes to the evolution of humankind. The positive effects of one’s life, or rather, one’s having lived, extend beyond oneself.

*Perfection.* Through social interest, human evolution is oriented toward the perfection of humankind: “The universal fact of the creative evolution of all living things can teach us that a goal is appointed for the line of development in every species – the goal of perfection, of active adaptation to the cosmic demands” (Adler, 1964, p. 270).

“Individual Psychology . . . regards all human striving as a struggle for perfection” (Adler, 1964, p. 37). While it is important that individuals strive to improve themselves, “the individual [can never] be the goal of the ideal of perfection, but only mankind as a cooperating community” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 40). The development of humankind was only
possible because we evolved as a cooperating community, and aimed for communal, rather than individual, perfection (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979).

In approaching the ideal cooperating community, the capacity, ability, and willingness to make larger contributions increase, and each individual increasingly participates as a part of the whole. With this heightened level of social interest, one lives “with so little sense of inferiority and vanity that our connections with others demand only efforts for the common good” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 42). A person demonstrating ideal communitarian social interest naturally lives “as a full-fledged, equal member of the human community with the interests of the human community as one’s own;” in other words, “the horizon of the individual is the horizon of humanity” (Manaster et al., 2003, p. 113).

*Inclusivity.* The perfection Adler discussed was not tied to any particular time or group: “The goal that is best suited for perfection must be a goal that stands for an ideal society amongst all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of evolution” (1964, p. 275). Further, this ideal communal form “must be thought of as eternally applicable . . . as could be thought of when humanity has attained its goal of perfection” (p. 275).

Dreikurs (1950) wrote that the larger meaning of social interest is to view behavior “from the aspect of eternity,” and that it is more than “a feeling of belonging to a certain group or class of people, or benevolence toward the whole race” (pp. 7-8). Social interest does not imply merely conforming with current social norms. It means that one must adapt to present society in a way that would be applicable to the ideal society, for all time. If current behavioral expectations go against what is valuable for humankind under the aspect of eternity, Adlerians would advise demonstrating courage and upholding the greater good by not conforming.
It is important to include in the ideal form of social interest all of humankind, because when one identifies with a “partial” community, for instance a political group, nation, culture, or religion, his or her social interest is incomplete (Manaster et al., 2003). Conflicts arise when the group with which one is identified feels superior over another, and this kind of partial social interest violates the principle of equality essential to successful evolution toward the goal of perfection for humankind.

*Interpersonal Social Interest*

The interpersonal form of social interest is manifested in cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral processes that people demonstrate in their present contexts. Social interest “will influence a person’s attention, perception, thinking about others, feelings such as empathy and sympathy, and finally motives and overt behavior relating to cooperation, helping, sharing, contributing, and so on” (Crandall, 1980, p. 481).

Adler stated that social interest is at the foundation of how individuals interact with others and objects in their environments. It “signifies the cohesion with our life, the affirmation, the conciliation with it. Through [social interest] in its rich differentiations (parental love, filial love, sexual love, love of one’s country, love of nature, art, science, love of mankind) … there comes about the general attitude a person takes, which actually constitutes his psychological life” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 30).

In a discussion of the interpersonal level of the process dimension, Ansbacher (1968) explained Adler’s uses of the term through three kinds of processes which could proceed in steps:

In step 1, social interest is an assumed *aptitude* for cooperation and social living which can be developed through training.
In step 2, this aptitude has been developed into the objective abilities of cooperating and contributing, as well as understanding others and empathizing with them.

In step 3, social interest is a subjective evaluative attitude, determining choices and thus influencing the dynamics of the individual. When not backed up by the skills represented in Step 2, such an attitude of social interest may not be sufficient to meet all contingencies (Ansbacher, 1968, pp. 29-30).

The components in this process may be conceptualized separately. However, only together in a dynamic force aligning the aptitude, abilities, and evaluative attitude of an individual do they present the dynamic process of social interest in a holistic sense (Manaster et al., 2003). In order to explain several of the most recognized aspects of social interest, they are broken into distinct, but closely related categories.

**Self-transcendence.** One essential component of social interest is self-transcendence. As Crandall (1980) explains, “The core of social interest is a valuing of things other than the self …. based on the human capacity to transcend the limits of the self and to identify with the needs and concerns of others” (p. 481). Identifying with things outside the self assists an individual in considering and striving for the welfare of humankind.

Social interest does not mean “being good” or upholding an image of being good. The spirit in which one gives to others is important, and should be done “without ulterior motives: a true absence of self-centeredness, egocentricity, and self-absorption” (Leak & Leak, 2006, p. 207). Neither does it suggest sacrificing oneself for the needs of others. What is good only for the community and in no way for oneself does not serve the interests of humankind. Often sacrificing and “playing the martyr” involves self-absorption. True social interest supplements, rather than contradicts, legitimate self-interests, as an individual’s own interests and the interests
of others are inexorably intertwined. In its purest form, the concerns of the community and the interests of the self will become one in the same.

Self-transcendence may take several forms: task- or other-directedness, useful growth or expansion, and generally not being limited by self-interest. An individual is able to go beyond consideration of personal needs to meet the requirements of a situation (Ansbacher, 1968). Self-transcendence ties together the other facets of social interest. It is present in all examples, because it requires a person to move beyond the self, whether in relationships with others, improving oneself, or creating a value structure.

Empathy. Defined as “an interest in the interests of others,” social interest requires empathy, or understanding and identification, with others and their concerns (Ansbacher, 1968). Adler explained that, going beyond mere feeling, social interest is a “form of life” in which individuals actively identify with others: “To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 37). One has reached an empathetic understanding with another when he or she can say that, under the same conditions and holding the same beliefs, one would have taken the same course of action as the other (Ansbacher, 1968).

Belonging and relatedness. Dreikurs equated social interest with a “feeling of belonging,” in the sense that “the person experiences belonging and knows that he has a place” (Ansbacher, 1968, pp. 32-33). Belonging means to feel like an equal and essential part of a community, whether it be a family, workplace, school, or even culture or country.

Oberst and Stewart (2003) emphasize that a feeling of “being ‘equally good’ as a human being” despite individual differences is a necessary part of belonging and social interest as a whole (p. 18). What becomes problematic is when, in identifying with a group, members place
their group above others and act with concern for their group alone, even causing harm to others in allegiance to the group with which they identify.

Relatedness is similar to belonging, though its meaning extends to “the whole of life…. It means the human being’s sense of himself as a part of the unity of existence” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 32). This “kinship with all that exists” suggests a feeling of community with a friendly universe. This sense of oneness can be felt through art or nature. Social interest implies that one has an affirmative attitude toward life and everything in the world.

A sense of belonging and relatedness is especially important because it encourages other aspects of interpersonal social interest such as empathy and concern, cooperation, and contribution. The greater one’s sense of belonging and relatedness, from small local groups to the larger universe, the more likely one is to identify with and act on behalf of others.

Cooperation and adaptation. From the perspective that human beings are socially embedded, cooperation with others and adaptation to society and one’s environment are of critical importance. Adler went so far as to say that all human problems require the aptitude, ability, and willingness for cooperation. (1964). Social interest has been described as “the unshakeable logic of human living-together” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 139). Social living provides feedback to individuals. If he or she does not cooperate with others or adapt to the surrounding social environment, consequences naturally arise.

Interdependence is another way of explaining social interest. Human beings are born into this world helpless. It would be impossible for a member of the species to survive from birth without the aid of others. Even in adulthood, cooperation with others is essential in meeting one’s basic needs, even if indirectly. While all human beings require some form of help from others, they also all have the ability to help and bring joy to others. This give-and-take is a
central part of daily life and has been important to our evolution (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

This working together and cooperating in mutual interest can produce effects which are greater than the sum of their parts. Maslow (1964) used the term social synergy to denote the merging of the desires of an individual with what is good for him or her as well as beneficial for others. In this way, social interest is “a merging of your interests with those of others, as essential harmony with and affirmation of mankind” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 37). It must be emphasized that a sense of equality is necessary for true cooperation. It is not present when one party takes advantage of another or sacrifices but receives no benefit.

Adaptation is similar to cooperation, but implies an adjustment to the external world. In this sense, social interest has been explained as a response to reality, or to the requirements of a situation (Ansbacher, 1968). A socially-interested individual is able to cope with difficulties in a socially adaptive way and successfully meet the tasks of life (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

**Contribution.** Helpful behavior is one of the most recognizable manifestations of social interest. As human beings are interdependent, it is imperative that we all contribute to the common welfare (Mosak, 1991). While the ideal form is concerned with a contribution for all humankind for all time, the interpersonal form can take place with contributions to individuals, groups, or institutions. Many people do so daily without even thinking about it.

Adler equated mental health with making contributions, saying that the healthy person is one “whose mode of life is so adapted that – whether he wants it or not – society derives a certain advantage from his work” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 39). The mentally unhealthy person expects to receive contributions without making any.
It has been noted that self-interest and the common good are linked with the benefits the community derives from individual contributions. In addition, individuals can receive benefits when making contributions to the community, as Adler advocates: “If an individual, in the meaning he gives to life, wishes to make a contribution . . . he will actually be bound to bring himself into the best shape” (Mosak, 1991, p. 312). Giving to others provides opportunities for improvement in the individual, in addition to the benefits derived from feeling connected and being useful.

*Socially useful striving.* Social interest can be described as improvement, expansion, or self-transcendence. The critical requirement of these actions is that they are employed in ways that are socially useful. Adler states, “By useful I mean in the interests of mankind generally. The most sensible estimate of the value of any activity is its helpfulness to all mankind, present and future” (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 36). The function of social interest is to guide striving toward the socially useful side of life (Ansbacher, 1968).

While the positive intentions, emotions, and characteristics that correspond with social interest matter, actions are more important than a mere “interest” in the interests of others. Thoughts and feelings, unless shared or acted upon in some way, are of no use to others (Ansbacher, 1968).

*Evaluative attitude.* Interests can be equated with values. Therefore, an interest in the interests of humankind would also mean to value what is valuable to humankind (Ansbacher, 1968). As the individual identifies with people or things outside himself or herself, has a feeling of connectedness, and desires to do well by the community, when making decisions he or she will consider what is of value to, or in the interests of, the community.
Social interest serves as a dynamic framework to guide people in making decisions. It becomes a foundation for morality and moral judgment. Ansbacher considered this to be the most important aspect of social interest (Ansbacher, 1968). As the highest form of humankind and the goal of evolution, social interest “is a normative ideal, a direction-giving goal” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 35).

Development of Social Interest

The capacity for social interest is innate, though it must be intentionally and consciously developed into an ability. Adler states, “Social interest … is rooted in the germ cell. But it is rooted as a potentiality, not as an actual ability” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 25). Just as an acorn will grow up to become an oak tree if given the right conditions, through a healthy and encouraging environment a child will develop social interest. Adler wrote of the importance of increasing social interest:

- It is almost impossible to exaggerate the value of an increase in social interest. The mind improves … the feeling of worth and value is heightened, giving courage and an optimistic view, and there is a sense of acquiescence in the common advantages and drawbacks of our lot. The individual feels at home in life and feels his or her existence worthwhile just so far as he or she is useful to others and is overcoming common, instead of private feelings of inferiority. (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 135)

Development of social interest begins in childhood in one’s family of origin (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). A child’s caregivers spark the child’s interest in other people and in the environment, in ever increasing circles. The child comes to understand and identify with others, feel a sense of belonging, cooperate, and exhibit helpful behavior. Over time, the child begins to
form a dynamic value structure as he or she internalizes first the interests of loved ones, then of the community.

Psychotherapy aims to increase social interest, mostly in the interpersonal forms, while decreasing striving for individual superiority (Manaster et al., 2003). The therapist seeks to understand and identify with the client, and help him or her learn to “re-see the world … to bring it more into harmony with a common view of the world” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 135). The therapist models social interest and reaches out to the client through empathy, giving him or her the experience of authentic contact and acceptance. This awakens social interest in the client (Ansbacher, 1968).

Schools and other institutions for young people seek to augment aspects of social interest, often through extra-curricular activities or processes that are not directly related to academics. Sadly, these programs are sometimes seen as non-essential and have lost funding in recent years. For adults, churches, civic and community organizations, and various other groups, organizations, and institutions aim to promote social interest in one form or another.

*Impact of Social Interest on Well-being*

Adler saw social interest as critical to maintaining mental health, increasing one’s ability to cope with stressors, and preventing mental illness. It has been empirically found to be related to several measures of positive mental health. Crandall, using his Social Interest Scale (SIS), found that social interest was consistently positively correlated with both self-report and indirect measures of adjustment and well-being (1980). The correlations were even higher in groups experiencing stress, indicating that social interest is important in coping with life’s difficulties. Individuals high in social interest generally experienced fewer perceived difficulties and reported higher levels of satisfaction in life.
In another set of studies, Crandall and Putman (1980) established positive correlations between social interest and measures of happiness; overall well-being; cognitive and affective measures of mental health; satisfaction in the life tasks of work and friendship; and perceived meaningfulness in life. Leak and Leak (2006) found relationships between social interest and measures of emotional and interpersonal well-being as well as measures of prosocial tendencies and prosocial moral reasoning.

Social Interest within Positive Psychology

Positive psychology has been defined as the scientific study of positive subjective experience, positive individual strengths and virtues, and the institutions that enable individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Wellness, optimal functioning, and a life well-lived are of central importance. The desired outcomes of positive psychology are happiness and well-being, terms which are often used interchangeably in the literature (Seligman, 2002).

Research in the field of positive psychology is centered around three domains: the pleasant life, in which individuals pursue positive subjective experiences; the good life, in which individuals identify and exercise positive strengths and virtues; and the meaningful life, in which individuals utilize strengths in service of something greater than themselves to create meaning in their lives. The full life consists of achieving happiness and well-being in all three areas.

Each domain is distinct from the others, contributes to life satisfaction individually, and can be pursued simultaneously (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). People scoring highest in measures of happiness and well-being orient themselves toward all three domains, with emphases on engagement and meaning (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In his book
Authentic Happiness, Seligman (2002) writes, “Just as the good life is something beyond the pleasant life, the meaningful life is beyond the good life” (p. 14).

The three approaches to happiness will be explored through the lens of social interest. The ideal and interpersonal forms of social interest shed light on the connections between positive psychology’s three lives, make sense of their contributions to long-term well-being, and unite them in movement toward a higher goal.

The Pleasant Life

The pleasant life or the "life of enjoyment" examines positive subjective experiences, similar to hedonic theories of happiness which encourage maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain and negative emotions. Researchers in this area define subjective well-being as an individual’s evaluations of his or her life, including emotional responses to events and cognitive judgments of satisfaction and fulfillment (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). Experiencing pleasant emotions, low levels of negative moods, and high life satisfaction are deemed valuable.

Positive emotions are grouped according to orientation to time in the past, present, and future (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). Enjoyment in the present includes the somatic pleasures, which are immediate but fleeting sensory experiences, and the complex pleasures, which involve learning or mastery. Reflective happiness, or positive emotion about the past, includes contentment, satisfaction, and serenity. Positive emotion about the future includes optimism, hope, and faith. Studies have shown that happiness can be improved in the pleasant life by savoring and mindfulness in the present, developing gratitude and forgiveness about the past, and increasing optimism for the future (Duckworth et al., 2005).

Pleasures versus Gratifications
Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) distinguish between *gratifications* and *pleasures*, stating that pleasures result from satiating “homeostatic needs such as hunger, sex, and bodily comfort,” while gratifications arise from stretching oneself and breaking through limits of homeostasis (p. 12). Adlerians have expressed similar ideas based on a paper published by Karl Bühler in 1927 that identified three kinds of pleasure (Gould & Ansbacher, 1975). Satiation pleasure is akin to positive psychology’s definition of pleasures, and function pleasure and pleasure of creative mastery, together called *function pleasure* by Gould and Ansbacher, could be categorized as gratifications.

Adlerians value gratifications over pleasures because gratifications demand “the exercising of one’s aptitudes or powers, a phenomenon of growth and well-being, whereas satiation is merely the making up of a deficiency” (Gould & Ansbacher, 1975, p. 150). In other words, gratifications strengthen social interest through self-transcendence, improvement, and increasing an individual’s capacity to make a contribution. Pleasures are momentary, dependent upon the environment, and for the most part are beyond one’s control. Gratifications are more controllable and enduring, providing benefits beyond the activity itself. To illustrate the difference, Gould and Ansbacher (1975) compare the baking of a pie to the eating of it. The baker experiences enjoyment while baking, joy from sharing with others, and increased self-esteem from mastering a task. The person eating the pie merely experiences the temporary pleasure of eating it. To “receive the enjoyment without effort . . . [is] not nearly as rich” (p. 151).

*Purpose of Positive Emotion*

Research about positive psychology’s pleasant life suggests that positive emotions have a purpose. Seligman (2002) posits that negative emotions indicate one is involved in a zero-sum
game, meaning that participants’ fortunes are inversely related in a competition for limited resources. In contrast, Seligman hypothesizes that positive emotions may have evolved to encourage people to play non-zero-sum, or win-win, games in which participants’ fortunes are directly correlated. Adlerians have a similar view, believing that negative emotions are a sign that one’s individual interests are not in line with community interests (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Positive emotions signify an agreement between personal and community interests.

**Elevation.** Elevation is an emotional state elicited by acts of virtue that motivates people to behave in virtuous ways themselves (Haidt, 2003). It is associated with a sensation of openness and warmth in the chest and feeling “lifted up” to a higher level of humankind. Synonyms include being “touched,” “moved,” or “inspired.” The opposite impact might be degradation, or a feeling of social or moral disgust.

Haidt (2003) suggests that in observing “good” acts people feel optimism, openness and connection with others, and are motivated to help humankind. Elevation moves people higher. In contrast, when observing “evil” acts that hurt others, one is motivated to close off and separate from others. In this situation, Haidt notes that one feels debased, dragged down, disgusted, and cynical about humankind.

Elevation specifically causes a person to desire betterment, both as an individual and as a contributor to one’s community, as well as affiliation with others (Haidt, 2003). In two studies comparing the motivation response inspired by elevation to those elicited by achievement and humor, the latter “energized people to engage in private or self-interested pursuits, whereas elevation seemed to open people up and turn their attention outward, toward other people” (p. 282).
From an Adlerian perspective, elevation describes a brief encounter with ideal communitarian social interest. Haidt’s recommendations for further study underscore how social interest can guide the study of positive emotion (2003). First, Haidt advocates the study of positive emotions that encourage goodness with the “potential to improve the lives of individuals and the functioning of society” (p. 285). For Adlerians, this means to study emotions that cultivate social interest. Second, Haidt advocates consulting other cultures and eras for guidance. Adlerians would suggest considering elevation within the context of all humankind, under the view to eternity. Third, Haidt advocates applying what is learned for the common good, to make a positive difference in the world. Knowledge gained should be useful and offer improvement for all humankind, according to Adlerians. Lastly, Haidt advocates exploring peak experiences and moral transformations. Adlerians would recommend focusing on examples of people striving for individual and community perfection to help humankind move toward the ideal form of relationship with the world.

*Broaden-and-build.* Beyond the momentary pleasant experiences they offer, positive emotions can be a means to encourage growth and improve well-being. The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) suggests that an experience of positive emotions expands an individual’s thought-action repertoire. This motivates him or her to build skills and relationships that will be beneficial in the future. Positive affect encourages approach behavior or continued action, facilitating adaptive behavior such as engagement with others (Fredrickson, 2001).

Fredrickson (2001) suggests that positive emotions broaden habitual modes of thinking and acting, allowing for a greater array of behavioral responses in a given situation. For example, joy sparks the desire to play, create, and push one’s limits; interest generates exploration of new information and experiences while expanding the self; pride produces an urge to communicate
news of achievements to others and to strive to meet even higher goals in the future (Fredrickson, 2001).

Fredrickson (2001) asserts that “positive emotions are vehicles for individual growth and social connection: By building people’s personal and social resources, positive emotions transform people for the better, giving them better lives in the future” (p. 224). The experience of positive emotions sets off an “upward spiral,” increasing resources, improving lives, creating more positive emotions, and so on, in a consistent movement toward the positive evolution of humankind.

A string of hedonically happy moments are not sufficient to create a happy life (Peterson et al., 2005). Adler wrote that “the fellow man strives in his goal not for pleasure but for happiness” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 213). Pleasure is momentary, fleeting, and dependent upon factors beyond a person’s control. Pleasure that does not inspire and guide positive action toward building resources that will benefit individuals and the larger human community is not a path to long-term happiness. However, positive emotions can add to happiness by encouraging and supporting the good life and the meaningful life. These have social interest as implicit goals.

The Good Life

The good life, or the “life of engagement,” involves identifying, cultivating, and utilizing individual character strengths and virtues for optimal functioning (Duckworth et al., 2005). A wise use of these traits facilitates increased engagement and produces gratification rather than a hedonic sense of pleasure (Duckworth et al., 2005).

Literature about the good life often refers to Aristotle’s idea of eudemonia. This suggests that true happiness involves discovering, developing, and living by one’s virtues. The good life
lays the foundation for the meaningful life. Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) state that the aim of the good life is for people to “develop what is best within themselves” in order to realize the meaningful life by “[using] these skills and talents in the service of greater goods – in particular the welfare of other people or humankind writ large” (p. 26). Two major areas of study within the good life include the exploration of character strengths and virtues, and employing them to achieve optimal engagement through a state of flow.

**Character Strengths and Virtues**

Given that positive psychology is the scientific study of what is best in people, positive traits needed to be defined. Researchers discovered six virtues that were consistently endorsed across cultures and throughout time: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Seligman et al., 2005). These core virtues were further explored and described through 24 supporting character strengths (see Figure 1).

For each virtue, character strengths were identified that met criteria for widely accepted goodness (ubiquity, contribution to individual fulfillment and happiness, moral value, is not diminishing to others, deliberate cultivation through institutions) and individual differences that can be measured in degrees (trait-like, measurable, distinctive, embodied in paragons and prodigies, selective absence) (Seligman et al., 2005).

The research produced a classification of character strengths and a detailed manual that organizes and describes individual strengths that encourage human flourishing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It aims to do for well-being what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association does for pathology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
Yearley defined character strengths as “a disposition to act, desire, and feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to a recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing” (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, p. 604). These strengths contribute to fulfillment and “act as buffers against mental illness” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7).

*Wisdom and knowledge.* The virtue of wisdom and knowledge is comprised of cognitive strengths related to seeking and using information. Character strengths valuable in this area are creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). From an Adlerian view, these strengths facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and development of wisdom in order to make a valuable contribution to humankind. They imply self-transcendence and identification with objects and ideas.

*Courage.* The virtue of courage helps an individual face and overcome challenges. Strengths in this area include bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These strengths assist in carrying out acts of social interest. They denote a feeling of equality with others, transcending perceived limits, meeting the needs of situation, and striving to achieve valued ends.

*Humanity.* The virtue of humanity includes traits important to relationships between people, such as love, kindness, and social intelligence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These strengths clearly represent components of interpersonal social interest, such as self-transcendence in the form of other-directedness, empathy, belonging and relatedness, and contribution directed toward loved ones and the immediate community. They also imply an evaluative attitude in which one considers the interests of others along with personal interests.

*Justice.* The virtue of justice includes strengths related to interaction among people in the larger community, such as fairness, leadership, and teamwork (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
These strengths undoubtedly involve the aspects of interpersonal social interest. Strengths of justice are similar to the strengths of humanity, though strengths of justice take place in one-to-many relationships on a large scale.

**Temperance.** The virtue of temperance aids individuals in maintaining balance and harmony. Strengths include forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, and self-regulation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Like the others, these traits are valued because human beings are socially embedded. The goals of temperance reflect components of interpersonal social interest such as empathy, belonging and relatedness, cooperation and adaptation, and an evaluative attitude that considers others.

**Transcendence.** The virtue of transcendence is made up of traits that help individuals engage with the larger world and provide meaning to their lives. Strengths in this area include appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and religiousness or spirituality (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These strengths are associated with an opening-up of the self and connecting with others. Related aspects of interpersonal social interest are self-transcendence, empathy, belonging and relatedness, cooperation, and an evaluative attitude in which personal interests include the interests of the community.

In summary, social interest is woven throughout positive psychology’s character strengths and virtues. It meets the criteria for widely accepted goodness; as social interest is ubiquitous, it contributes to fulfillment and happiness for individuals as well as for humankind; it is morally valued, does not diminish others, and is deliberately cultivated through institutions. However, as social interest is a dynamic set of cognitions, feelings, behaviors, and motivations rather than an individual trait, it does not meet the conditions of being an individual difference that can be measured in degrees. Instead, ideal communitarian social interest is the overall goal
of character strengths and virtues. They are made up of traits that encourage demonstrations of interpersonal forms of social interest.

The Adlerian value of use rather than possession is important in a discussion of character strengths. It is not enough to merely have the traits discussed. It is important to employ them in a socially adaptive way. Social interest guides striving to the useful side of life, and has no socially maladaptive uses.

Park et al. (2004) echo sentiments of Adler in stating that “virtuous activity involves choosing virtue for itself and in light of a justifiable life plan” (p. 604). Ideal communitarian social interest is the overall “life plan” that guides human beings. It establishes a moral framework and an evaluative attitude through which potential actions are measured. In addition, Park et al. suggest that these character strengths and virtues are part of an “evolutionary process that selected for these predispositions toward moral excellence as a means of solving the important tasks necessary for the survival of the species” (pp. 603-604). This mirrors Adler’s view of social interest as meeting the tasks of life in a socially adaptive way and contributing to the positive evolution of humankind.

Flow

Using one’s character strengths to approach challenging tasks leads to the experience of flow and the engaged life. Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as “the experience associated with engaging one’s highest strengths and talents to meet just-doable challenges” (Duckworth et al., 2005, p. 638). Flow takes place in the interaction between an individual and an object (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). A state of flow is characterized by intrinsic motivation, intense and focused concentration in the present, the merging of action and awareness and loss of self-
consciousness, the perceived match between task and skill with full use of capacities, and experiential rewards (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

Flow is different from hedonic pleasure in that the individual becomes lost in an activity and often feels no emotion in the present. At times, the activity may be unpleasant, like training for a marathon or cleaning the garage, but once completed it is reported as satisfying (Seligman, Parks, & Steen, 2004). Flow is a gratification that fully engages the actor. It is possible to experience flow in conversations, reading a challenging book, playing an instrument, or accomplishing a task. There are no shortcuts to gratifications, as they necessarily involve an element of challenge.

To experience flow means to develop one’s capacities to grow. However, the activities and skills themselves need not be valued in order to be considered flow. They only need to be enjoyed (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Flow and meaning sometimes overlap, but not all flow experiences are meaningful and not all meaningful experiences induce flow. According to Seligman et al. (2004), “finding flow in gratifications need not involve anything larger than the self” (p. 1380).

While flow does not require a contribution to something larger than oneself, a focus on something outside the self is necessary. Social interest is expressed in flow through a kind of empathy, or identification and understanding, with objects outside the self. An individual experiencing flow is directed away from the self and toward engagement with an object, transcending the self and perceived limits. Improved skills and increased capacities are products of flow.

A flow state that is meaningful describes vital engagement (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). It has been explained as “a general way of being related to the world”
In order to maintain prolonged involvement in an activity, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2003) suggest that one must enjoy the activity and find it meaningful, seeing it as worthwhile and as serving valued ends. In the vitally engaged life, enjoyment and subjective meaning come together (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). From this perspective, flourishing is defined as “finding meaning and enjoyment in one’s relationship with the world” (p. 83).

Individuals seek challenges that match increasing skill levels and refine relationships with optimal activities to create a life theme (Massimini & Della Fave, 2000). A life theme is made up of activities, social relationships, and life goals that become central to an individual’s life. In terms of Adlerian social interest, this refers to the unique, self-consistent way an individual belongs, contributes, improves, transcends, and strives for individual and community perfection.

Vital engagement facilitates psychological selection and cultural evolution by refining a self-consistent, enjoyable, meaningful, and socially adaptive way of being in the world (Massimini & Della Fave, 2000). Personal interests merge with those of the community. In Adlerian terms, an individual’s unique way of demonstrating interpersonal social interest benefits both the individual and the community. They manifest ideal communitarian social interest.
The Meaningful Life

Study of the meaningful life, or the "life of affiliation," examines how individuals derive meaning, purpose, and a positive sense of well-being from being a part of and contributing to something larger and more permanent than themselves (Seligman et al., 2004). Through this area of study, "positive psychology points the way toward a secular approach to noble purpose and transcendent meaning" (Seligman, 2002, p. 14).

Seligman (2002) suggests that "the larger the entity to which you can attach yourself, the more meaning in your life" (p. 14). Accordingly, the meaningful life is situated within the context of positive institutions such as family, community, nation, politics, belief systems, and so on. It is believed that positive institutions best facilitate the positive emotions and positive individual traits that enable human beings to flourish (Duckworth et al., 2005). As Baumeister and Vohs (2002) point out, people usually get meaning from several areas of their lives, including family and love relationships, work, community, religion, and others.

It seems that the meaningful life describes ideal communitarian social interest, as it signifies striving for the perfection of humankind, ever moving toward a "noble purpose" and meaning that transcends time and space. For Adler, the meaning of life is expressed in social interest. The life of an individual is meaningful when it serves the welfare of all humankind (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

While positive psychology has generated a great deal of research about the pleasant life and the good life, very little of the meaningful life has been explored (Gable & Haidt, 2005). This area of study also examines the characteristics of positive institutions that encourage individuals to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Perhaps the dearth of information about this area arises from confusion about the focus of the meaningful life. The original
definition implies a focus on subjective meaning within the individual, and “positive institutions” suggests a focus on more formal structures. Both concepts seem to leave out the interpersonal relationships that are an essential part of well-being.

*The Full Life*

Pursuing happiness simultaneously through the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life results in the full life. The full life “predicts life satisfaction beyond the sum of its parts” because each route to happiness contributes to the others (Peterson et al., 2005, p. 37). Orientations to engagement and meaning carry the most weight toward well-being, though positive emotions add value to life satisfaction (Peterson et al., 2005).

As illustrated in elevation and the broad-and-build theory, positive emotions can encourage individuals to seek engagement and meaning, encouraging both interpersonal and ideal forms of social interest. Positive emotions are linked with meaning via vital engagement. The most powerful examples of the full life involve synergy between positive emotions, engagement, and meaning. Interpersonal forms of social interest feed into the overall goal of ideal communitarian social interest.

The goal of interventions in positive psychology-based psychotherapy must be “the social reintegration of individuals by fostering the cultivation of culturally adaptive activities and life goals” (Massimini & Della Fave, 2000, p. 30). In other words, interventions aim to guide striving to the socially useful side of life through increased interpersonal social interest. Massimini and Della Fave (2000) suggest that on a larger scale, people should be encouraged to improve themselves as individuals and to contribute to the betterment of all humankind in ways that are at the same time pleasant, engaging, and meaningful.
Conclusion

The Adlerian concept of social interest serves as an explanatory construct that unites the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life within positive psychology. It gives direction and meaning to the three areas of study, making sense of what otherwise appears as a hodgepodge of ideas and characteristics.

The threads of social interest run through all routes to happiness, contributing to long-term life satisfaction and well-being in each area. Social interest links the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life for a complete approach to happiness in the full life.

Positive emotions, positive traits, and positive institutions are all in the service of ideal communitarian social interest. As inherently social creatures, true happiness for human beings is to be found in manifesting social interest.

Writing about the positive evolution of humankind, Seligman (2002) states, “This design toward more complexity is our destiny,” equating increased complexity with goodness (p. 258). He mirrors the words of Adler, who suggested that “the indestructible destiny of the human species is social interest …. Man is inclined toward social interest, toward the good” (Ansbacher, 1978, p. 134). Seligman (2002) advises that “the best we can do as individuals is to choose to be a small part of furthering this progress” (p. 260). In order to contribute to the higher evolution of humankind, scholars in the field of positive psychology would be wise to integrate the Adlerian concept of social interest into the explanation of the full life.
References


**Figure 1. Classification of 6 Virtues and 24 Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtue and strength</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Wisdom and knowledge</td>
<td>Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-mindedness</td>
<td>Thinking things through and examining them from all sides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of learning</td>
<td>Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Being able to provide wise counsel to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Courage</td>
<td>Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td><em>Not</em> shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>Finishing what one starts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zest</td>
<td>Approaching life with excitement and energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Humanity</td>
<td>Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Doing favors and good deeds for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Valuing close relations with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social intelligence</td>
<td>Being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Justice</td>
<td>Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Organizing group activities and seeing that they happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Working well as member of a group or team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Temperance</td>
<td>Strengths that protect against excess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Forgiving those who have done wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modesty</td>
<td>Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>Being careful about one’s choices; <em>not</em> saying or doing things that might later be regretted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation</td>
<td>Regulating what one feels and does</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Transcendence</td>
<td>Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of beauty and excellence</td>
<td>Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Expecting the best and working to achieve it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiousness</td>
<td>Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>