

Adlerian Ideas: Social Beings

(One of Nine Essays on Adlerian Principles)

Wes Wingett PhD

One of the first principles of Adlerian psychology is that people are social beings who want to contribute and belong first in a family, then in an educational setting, and then in the larger community.

Alfred Adler was born on the outskirts of Vienna, Austria in 1870. His father was a grain merchant, his mother did not work outside the family home that eventually included seven children, and Alfred was the second child and the second son. Adler's experiences and his theory were impacted by some events within his family of origin. When Adler was four years of age his brother Rudolf died in the same room where they both slept. Adler's family was impacted by an economy characterized by many peaks and valleys and times of economic insecurity. Adler's family was a Jewish family in a predominantly non-Jewish area.

Alfred Adler has been considered to be one of the first social psychologists. His theory and practice centered on understanding and empowering democratic leadership in three social arenas, the family, the school, and the community. Democratic leadership would be characterized as environments embracing the idea of freedom with order in families, schools, and communities. Democratic leadership would be contrasted with autocratic leadership characterized as order without freedom and anarchy characterized by freedom without order.

In addition, Adler believed that at birth humans entered a family seeking connection and needed help from others to evolve into socially responsible individuals. Eventually each individual in the family would contribute to the good of the family. This tradition of helping others hopefully would continue in schools and communities.

After finishing medical school Adler wrote his first publication focusing on a social problem, that is, the working conditions of tailors. In 1895 Adler identified a social problem, described the social problem, and created possible solutions to treat that specific problem.

After his fourth tour of duty in the military, Adler returned to Vienna in 1919 and began working with parents, teachers, and students in child guidance centers in Vienna. The movement toward learning democratic principles in families and schools were introduced in post-World War I Vienna. Families that had been impacted by war characterized Vienna. Families were affected by the death and injuries of loved ones, families were affected by division and displacement. Some families were living in poverty. Adler and his associates began working with Viennese families and their teachers.

Adler and his colleagues worked together to encourage and empower personal and social understanding and responsibility in families and schools. In the early 1930's 33 child guidance clinics had been established in Vienna.

Adler's work in communities continued after his completion of medical school, the writing of his first paper, and the opening of a medical practice that was located near the circus in Vienna where people with a variety of issues sought his help.

Adler's influence and his socially forward thinking have influenced families and schools through family and teacher education. His influence in the community has impacted psychiatric hospitals and psychiatric day care centers, all Twelve Step programs, and positive and productive work place relationships.

Adler's theoretical emphasis on equality, education, encouragement, empathy, creative problem solving, and personal and social responsibility has positively influenced families, schools, and communities.