

SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN ADLERIAN PERSPECTIVE AND LITERATURE REVIEW (*)

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It may seem surprising for a value-based theory like Adler's Individual Psychology – one centred on the equal dignity of individuals – that social justice has not been a major interest for publication. Concern for social justice has certainly been addressed in individual articles before, but, as an area of concentrated scholarship, social justice has not been addressed. So, how might Adlerians approach this topic, one with such wide implications and a body of literature that spans sociological, psychological, religious and political discourses?

The authors worked for several years together at the Adler School of Professional Psychology in Chicago, U.S.A. There, the school has taken a creative stand on social justice by developing the Institute on Social Exclusion (ISE, established in 2005). In this article, we follow the Institute's objectives: To advance social justice both as an academic and practical concern and then to re-frame the social justice discourse by integrating the concept of "social exclusion" as a means of viewing the global efforts for social justice. We will do this by means of a literature review of recent Adlerian research on the topic.

Advancing Social Justice

Advancing social justice at the ISE involves three major activities: community outreach, public education and applied research. Central to each activity as it applies to social justice is awareness of the ways

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in which the structures of society systematically “exclude” certain groups of people from many of the rights, resources and opportunities that are essential for a normal way of life. To address social justice, Adler’s Individual Psychology is taking a renewed interest in the ways in which laws, public policies, institutional behaviours and popularly-held attitudes can lead to such social problems as poverty, homelessness, hunger, illiteracy, sickness and judicial inequity.

One example of community outreach is helping to identify and dismantle the structural barriers that low-income women face when trying to access breast cancer care in metropolitan Chicago. A public education project called the “Social Exclusion Simulation” involves using a sophisticated role-playing exercise illustrating what structural barriers are, how they operate, how they impact on people’s lives, and how they can undermine human well-being. An example of applied research recently undertaken by one of us and other Adlerian colleagues (Todman et al., 2009) is the publication entitled “*Social Exclusion Indicators for the United States*”, which we will address in the second half of this paper. Other projects combine outreach, educational activities and research, addressing topics such as the “social determinants of mental health”, the “neglected infections of poverty”, and gun-violence in poor urban communities.

While readers may already have an intuitive sense of what social exclusion means, there are many ways of defining it. Simply stated, it is a way of characterising contemporary forms of social disadvantage. This definition focusses on the processes by which individuals and groups of people are systematically blocked or “excluded” from the rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of our society, and that are essential for social integration.

Increasingly, the concept of social exclusion is a part of social policy discussions in many parts of the world. One finds frequent references to exclusion in academic institutions, government agencies, community-based as well as large non-governmental

organisations throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as well as in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In recent years, several degree-granting academic programmes that highlight social exclusion have emerged, especially in Indian universities.

Despite its pervasiveness, the concept is relatively new in the U.S.A. Only in recent months has it begun to gain traction at the policy level there. And, until now, the concept has not been directly connected with Adler's Individual Psychology. In this article, we intend to go some distance in rectifying this lapse.

As a term of rather recent vintage, Adler himself did not speak explicitly about "social exclusion". Nonetheless he formulated his most enduring theoretical concept, *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, by describing the importance of being and feeling a part of the community while acting within the community to alleviate peoples' exclusion from the community (Ansbacher, 1992). While Adler personally stood for and practised therapy inclusively, admittedly his theoretical formulations sometimes fell short of this ideal. In the spirit of "critical psychology" (cf. Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002), *The Journal of Individual Psychology* has openly addressed this theoretical shortcoming (Mansager, 2008) as it applies to lesbian and gay individuals. It is in light of this internal critique that we believe social justice and social exclusion can now be credibly addressed from an Adlerian perspective. By addressing social exclusion as a hindrance to social justice and a manifestation of social injustice, we bring attention to the central Adlerian assertion that people are social beings and have a strong need – indeed, an imperative – to belong to community and to contribute to society.

Among the central questions that arise in the growing body of social exclusion literature are: "What brings about social exclusion?" and "Who is responsible for exclusionary processes?" In much of the literature, structural features of society are understood to be causal: often these structures – e.g., laws, policies, institutions, attitudes – bring about unbearable effects on individuals and communities. Here, we would also like to underscore the question of "whither?" - i.e., what is the *aim* of social exclusion? After all, the structures that

predispose some individuals and groups to poverty and other forms of social disadvantage do not come out of thin air. Rather, as Adler (1898/2002) pointed out over a century ago, social actions – whether oriented to health, education, housing or employment – are envisioned and constructed by politically motivated people. The relative success and failure of their efforts must also be considered from the perspective of the intended goals of these given social architects. Here, then, is another Adlerian principle in action: The “causes” of social processes are interconnected with the “goals” of the processors – aetiology and teleology – being dialectically interconnected. Practically speaking, “visioning” the world differently must occur as we dismantle the “causal aspects” that marginalise people within society. Otherwise, individuals and communities can feel powerless in their efforts to change the social structures that are the cause of social exclusion. Aware of this, Adler’s Individual Psychology can help reframe the social justice dialogue on social disadvantage by highlighting its underlying, often hidden, structural origins and it can offer concrete suggestions on how to impact on these structures.

To this end, Adlerians are advocating a re-evaluation of our strong, historical commitment to *personal* responsibility as the basis for social policy and a greater commitment to *social* responsibility in policymaking. We are not promoting the elimination of personal responsibility as a basis for social problem-solving practice. Rather, we are advocating an interactive balance between personal and social responsibility – a balance that reflects the facts that social structures can and often do harm individuals and their communities, and that individuals and communities typically are limited in their power or authority to alter those structures and the ill-effects that emanate from them. This more balanced perspective - regarding the relative roles of social and personal responsibility for human welfare - incorporates another important Adlerian principle: *personal* freedoms (rights) exist together with *social* obligations (responsibilities).

There are many current discussions on the issue of social exclusion in the United States. They can be found in disciplines such as sociology, economics, political science, geography, anthropology, theology, biology and linguistics, as well as within professions like the arts, psychology, law, business, social work, architecture, planning and communications. These discussions are often disconnected, typically occurring in isolation from one another. While there are many reasons why such isolated discussions occur (e.g., differences in language, terminology, different understandings of the social world, a preference for particular types of literary discourse, and the like), the main reason is the near universal preference for working within one's own disciplinary comfort-zone.

Still, it is critical that we work across, at the intersections of, and in the spaces between disciplines and professions in order to address effectively the complex social problems that confront the contemporary world, including those created by exclusionary processes. We must engage in a greater exchange among disciplines and professions with deeper interdisciplinary connections. The reality is that no single discipline or profession – or even small groupings of these professions – has the breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and insights required to understand comprehensively, and effectively address the social challenges that we face today.

Reframing the Social Justice Discourse

Our tendency to limit social problem-solving practice to narrow disciplinary and professional boundaries undermines efforts to strike the balance between personal and social responsibility. This is certainly part of the reason why so many of our social problems persist and often worsen over time. By framing the issue of social justice within an innovative Adlerian philosophical thought-stream, it is possible to demonstrate links among the different professions' discussions on exclusion. In the following endeavour, we have clustered recent Adlerian research to draw attention to the three salient aspects of social justice mentioned in the title of this paper:

Social Exclusion, Social Interest and Social Responsibility.

Social Exclusion. Sociologist Hilary Silver (2009) recently reassessed Adler from a social exclusion perspective. In her publication, “Reflections on Alfred Adler: A Social Exclusion Perspective,” this national policy advisor shows an intuitive understanding of Adler and his original social concerns. She challenges social and critical psychologists to appreciate the foresight of Adler’s concern for *work* as integral to human dignity.

Urban planner Lynn Todman, lawyer Sherrod Taylor and social worker Kerry Cochrane (2009) led a research team of Adler School graduate students to conceptualise social exclusion with their article, “Social Exclusion Indicators for the United States”. Their team of student researchers provided examples of indicators and measures of social exclusion in the United States. Such indicators and measures are essential for assessing the effectiveness of policies and programmes aimed at dismantling exclusionary structures. Their article offers a few of the many possible indicators of social exclusion from data that are so readily available, that it is embarrassing to see how prevalent the problem is compared to how unexamined it has remained until now among scholars of psychology.

Table 1: Indicators and Measures of Social Exclusion in the U.S.A.

Indicator	Measures
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to Health Insurance Coverage • Usage of Primary Health Care (annual visits to physicians) • Amenable Mortality (diabetes death rates) • Food Insecurity (intersects with education)
Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Juveniles Sentenced to Life Without Parole • Supermaximum-security (“Supermax”) Confinement
Shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home Ownership
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet Access • Computer Access

Social Interest. Three more recent publications address social interest from a Marxist perspective. Kurt Adler (1994) quotes Marx and Engels as writing, “The issue is to make one’s *private interest* coincide or be in harmony with *social interest* in mankind” (p. 132, emphasis added). In the following publications, you will find a common thread of taking some *privately* held Adlerian concepts and exploding them onto the *social* playing field.

Cultural historian W. F. Santiago-Valles (2009) fundamentally re-contextualises Adler’s life partner. In his “*Context and Impact of Raissa Epstein’s Ideas on Alfred Adler’s Social Imaginary (1897-1935)*,” Santiago-Valles broadens the perspective on Epstein as a major and enduring influence on Adler and his theory. He wholly re-animates her by demonstrating how Epstein sits within the broad socialist context occurring in the late 19th and early 20th-Centuries. This exquisitely rich historical publication leaves therapists and educators wondering, whether or not the Alfred Adler met in professional training is, indeed, the historical one.

Another publication, “Adler’s Influence on American Law,” is written by Sherrod Taylor (2009), a civil rights attorney and Faculty Fellow at the Adler School’s ISE. Taylor’s article looks at Adler’s impact especially on American civil rights law, by addressing psychologist Kenneth B. Clark’s famous doll studies on the psychological effects of segregation on black children. This article is a reminder of the power of Adler’s legacy and the responsible action it has and can still engender.

Christopher A. Shelley’s (2009), “Transpeople and Social Justice” provides penetrating insight into society’s exclusion of transgendered individuals. Writing from a knowledgeable and compassionate viewpoint, he deals with the complex issues of “passing” as homosexual, i.e., the sex one feels one is without the comfort of publicly owning the transgendered nature of one’s being – and the associated difficulties entailed in belonging to the larger community.

Shelley's clarity in identifying how transpeople are "repudiated" and implicitly marginalised by diagnostic nomenclature (DSM/ICD) is striking. He challenges helping professionals to think and work in an inclusive manner.

Social Responsibility. We also want to mention two publications and a book review that offer practical applications of Adler's Individual Psychology in a socially responsible manner. Both publications offer case examples of their work and both strongly identify social interest with social responsibility. Ursula Oberst (2009), based in Barcelona, Spain, wrote "Educating for Social Responsibility". Besides a stimulating and convincing theoretical section, her article demonstrates an effective path to raising socially responsible children that is currently being used in Catalonia. Her "post-modern" approach challenges some of the cherished "modernist" assumptions of standard parenting programmes current in the United States. As such, it deserves the full attention of parent-educators and therapists alike.

Cynthia Uccello (2009), writing from Geneva, Switzerland published "Social Interest and Social Responsibility in Contemporary Corporate Environment". In it, she takes a closer look at corporate social responsibility by suggesting that it can be practically imbedded in global companies by fostering social interest in the company's individual employees. Her example of applying socially responsible principles in her own practice provides a more familiar orientation for Adlerian therapists concerned about socially responsible practice.

Finally, in a practical application of Adlerian critique, Sharyl M. Trail (2009) reviews David Blankenhorn's (2007) potentially influential book, *The Future of Marriage*. Blankenhorn is the President of the Institute for American Values, a prominent think-tank, which, like the ISE, intends to influence public policy. His arguments against the acceptance of same-sex marriage are well formulated. Trail's review is fair-minded and hard-hitting, effectively dismantling these seemingly convincing arguments against same-sex parenting.

The interconnected contexts of these publications call attention to two other pieces of literature. The first is Adler's (1898/2002) original work entitled, *Health Manual for the Tailoring Trade*. Found within the Collected Clinical Works of Alfred Adler, this brief study provides a surprisingly clear starting point for the importance of studying social exclusion. The second piece of literature is Henry Stein's (2009) innovative "Social Inclusion and the Democratic Character". This serves as an "avenue of internet technology" for extending our knowledge of social justice from an Adlerian perspective.

After facing squarely the impact of social exclusion and the socially responsible challenge of dismantling it, Stein's piece offers one way in which to consider social *inclusion*. The democratic character that Adler was so fond of promoting is presented here in a way that challenges an array of professions.

We hope as a result of this brief discussion you are at once unnerved – by the pervasive examples of injustice around us and, at the same time, aroused to action, socially responsible action – to move (as psychologists) in an effective way in order to shape a more just society.

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