

Alfred Adler and the Future of Coaching: Ethics, Equality, and Eternity

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Abstract: Alfred Adler influenced not only the profession of clinical psychology but also the development of professional coaching in the 20th century, resulting in his being recognized as a “grandfather of coaching” by non-Adlerians as well as by Adlerians. Adler’s humanistic and integrative concept of “social interest” is currently finding expression in coaching’s concerns regarding oppression and privilege. Adlerian assumptions not yet taken up by coaching present three challenges for the future of the field, under the headings of ethics, equality, and eternity.

The claim that “Adler is the grandfather of coaching” was made not by stalwarts in the Adlerian community, but rather by professional coaches who had little familiarity with Individual Psychology before 1998, when we at Adler Graduate Professional School (AGPS) asked them to design a coach training program. Not being familiar with Alfred Adler, faculty members wondered whether coaching would be a “fit” at a school with Adler in the name.

Following the suggestion by Mosak, Maniacci, and Maniacci (1999) that assumptions define “the rules of the game” of any endeavor, the AGPS Coaching Founding Faculty¹ compared coaching assumptions with those of Alfred Adler to see whether there is a fit. Coaching assumptions were drawn from International Coach Federation (ICF) competencies (2019), influential coaching literature (Page,

¹ Adler Coaching Founding Faculty and program curriculum design members included Director Melinda Sinclair, Dean Emerita Adria Trowhill, Darlene Crissley, Dorothy Greenaway, Jeanie Nishimura, Linda Page, and Sue Sheldon.

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2003; Rock and Page, 2009), and the faculty members' own training in various coaching schools.

Adlerian assumptions were based on selected Adlerian authors (Page, 2003); lectures and reading from co-author Page's studies for the Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology at Adler University (1978-1989); and her teaching as part of the Doctoral Faculty at that institution (1991-1999). Seeing the extent of overlap, the AGPS Faculty declared a "fit" and further that "Alfred Adler is the grandfather of coaching." Director Melinda Sinclair and co-author Page reported on this conclusion in 2006.

However, the extent of Adler's influence on coaching appears to go beyond the specific coach training program at AGPS. In a dissertation on the history of coaching, based on interviews with 170 individuals active in coaching organizations in the 1990s and early 2000s, Vikki Brock (2008) listed Adler as the first "Key Influencer" of the "Originator Generation" of coaching (approximately 1920s to 1970s) and the only one before the mid-1930s (p. 459). In doing so, she confirmed Adler's grandparentage for all of coaching's progeny.

In sum, Adler's contributions to underlying coaching theory have been both central and substantial. Co-author Page claimed (2009) that these contributions have gone largely unacknowledged by non-Adlerian coaches (and psychologists and psychotherapists) because Adler drew on a systemic paradigm that was less accepted as "scientific," and thus legitimate, during his lifetime. For example, in philosophy, anthropology, and sociology, "...between the beginning and end of the 20th century, there was a shift in *how* we understand who we are - from assumptions of *individualism* through *relatedness* to *complexity*." (Page, 2009, p. 112) Similar shifts occurred in fields foundational to coaching including health sciences, psychology, psychotherapy, and management, bringing them more in line with Adler's philosophy (see also Rock and Page, 2009).

However, one crucial Adlerian contribution was *not* central to early coaching ideas but was identified by Sinclair and other members of the faculty (2006) during their development of the AGPS

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Coaching curriculum: social interest. In so doing, these coaches made an innovative contribution to the future of coaching theory.

Social interest as a meta-assumption

In discussing Adler's theories, coaching faculty members struggled with how social interest, a central concept of Adler's approach (Adler, 1964/1933; Ansbacher, 1991/1968), relate to coaching concepts. They saw a connection between Adler's assumptions of "idiography," or striving for unique personal expression, and that of "social embeddedness." They came to the conclusion that these two assumptions, taken together, reveal a paradoxical challenge for all human beings, the solution to which has a familiar ring:

We are all caught in a paradoxical tension between being ourselves and being in relationship with others. On the one hand, we are all unique individuals, with a strong need and desire to express our unique selves fully in our life and work. [idiography]

On the other hand, we are embedded in a web of relationships with other individuals, a member of multiple systems, and irretrievably part of humanity. [social embeddedness]

Our creativity in resolving this paradox between self-expression and embeddedness determines, to a significant extent, our level of success and fulfillment. The key to resolving this paradox lies in using our unique selves to make a contribution to others. [social interest]

(Adler Graduate Professional School, 2018, p. 2)

Adlerians will recognize that "using our unique selves to make a contribution to others" is a reference to Adler's concept of "social interest," or "Gemeinschaftesgefühl" in German (Adler, 1964/1933). This refers to a feeling of belonging and kinship with one another, to having "...*interest* in the interests of others" (Ansbacher, 1991/1968, p. 39). Social interest is an inborn potential for all people, but one that must be socially nurtured.

The coaching faculty also recognized social interest as Adler's criterion for mental health, in that resolving the dilemma determines "our level of success and fulfillment" (Adler, 1956). This integration of basic Adlerian assumptions helps establish social interest as superordinate, a "meta-assumption."

Even though the term “social interest” may not be commonly used, coaches and coach organizations are currently engaging with related issues. The Association of Coach Training Organizations (ACTO) describes itself as “...calling forth, honoring and inviting the uniqueness of all individuals and diverse life experiences” (<https://actoonline.org/>) and the Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (GSAEC) has set academic standards requiring preparation in Cultural Diversity, Individual Differences, and Multiculturalism (<https://gsaec.org>). Thus, the *meaning* of social interest is acknowledged in coaching.

However, at least three related challenges remain for future coaches to fully draw on the contributions of “Grandfather Adler.”

Ethical Challenge

Ethical standards for coaches (for example, see <https://coachfederation.org/code-of-ethics>) and discussions of ethics in general have focused almost entirely on the relationship between coach and client, whether individual, group, team, or organization: definitions of roles, contracting, confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and so forth. More recently, ethical questions regarding the relationship of coaching *per se* to wider social issues have emerged in publications such as *Complex Situations in Coaching: A Critical Case-Based Approach* (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2019).

For Chapter 4, Values in coaching, Louis and Fatien Diochon invited co-author Page to comment on a case entitled “Working for the Big Bad Wolf” (2019, pp. 73-80). The coach (Martin) in this case puzzles over whether to accept an assignment to work with senior executives in a mining company that had engaged in environmentally destructive practices, actions inimical to Martin’s personal values. On the basis that he would end up with very few clients if he excluded those with whom he disagreed, Martin takes the case.

In her comments, Page highlights the difference between espoused and enacted values and challenges coaches, when there is a conflict between the two, to ask the question “Which side am I

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on?” If “good” coaching helps organizations destroy the environment, for whom is it “good?” Is coaching being used as a way of “cooling the mark out?” (Goffman, 1952) That is, do coaches serve the function of softening feelings of loss or failure, similar to how one member of a team of con artists befriends, explains, and helps the “sucker” in a fraud adjust to their victimization? That is, to what extent does coaching serve to blunt discontent and maintain the *status quo* that is implicated in social and environmental destruction? (see IPCC, 2018)

“Psychology of use” is an Adlerian principle that can help coaches and the coaching profession sort through these questions. Robert Powers and Jane Griffith (2013) explain that understanding a person’s behavior is not achieved by listing *traits* associated with their actions (laziness, bad temper, intelligence) but by observing how they *use* their various capacities. As a corollary of social embeddedness, psychology of use takes into account the dynamic nature of the interlocking social systems in which we are embedded. Using this principle, we can ask “ultimately, in this situation, to what use are my efforts being put?” instead of categorizing what we do as intrinsically good or bad without reference to context. Actions or even personality traits that are useful and beneficial in one situation or for one group of people may not be so for other situations or groups. Therefore, it is incumbent for coaches to ask when considering the purpose of each engagement and each coaching interaction, “who, ultimately, does this benefit?” and “who, ultimately, does it harm?”

Asking this question can reveal where we actually stand on an issue, along with consequences that lie outside our immediate awareness. Without that awareness, our conscious choices are limited to whatever is “usual,” “expected,” “normal,” or “standard.” That is, to keep doing what we have been doing. Coaching that helps one person, organization, or state better exploit or damage other persons, organizations, or states can be considered “good” only from the perspective of the exploiter. Whatever our intentions, in polarized situations our actions put us on one side - exploiter - or the other - exploited.

Which side does coaching in general and coaches in particular choose to take? Our position as professionals in the middle class gives us the opportunity to choose. Given this privilege, where does our responsibility lie? From Adler's perspective, "We would never call anything worthwhile if it were not worthwhile for the whole of [hu]mankind" (Adler, 1931, p. 226) To what extent will we "live" our values?

Equality Challenge

Societies around the world are wracked by the insistence that some people or groups are inherently or biologically superior while others are treated as unworthy (see Rosenthal, 2019). However, as Adler warned, "The striving for personal power is a disastrous delusion and poisons man's [sic.] living together" (1966, p. 169). Adler departed from what many presume to be a need for hierarchy and authoritarian control when he proclaimed "The ironclad logic of social living." Rudolf Dreikurs explained and elaborated on this concept in his book *Social equality: The challenge of today* (1994). It may be concluded that Adler's "ironclad logic" is, simply put, equality.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) and Stiglitz (2013), among others, have concluded that *everyone*, at *every* level of hierarchy, benefits from greater equality. Inequality, indeed, is a poison, the disastrous consequences of which are being visited on populations around the world, on our neighbors and clients, and, indeed, on ourselves. Carol Reid Day, a professional coach and MA graduate of Adler Graduate School in Minnesota, provides a case study (2018) that models using Adlerian principles and techniques to provide an "...opportunity to create inclusive and equitable conditions and address equity and social injustice." (2018, p.73)

If increased equality means better mental and physical health and welfare for *all*, and if decreased equality makes us *all* relatively more ill and deprived, what are the implications for coaching, a profession that claims to benefit people and organizations. In 2016, along with the other

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programs at AGPS, the coaching program responded to the equality challenge by adopting this

Community Declaration:

Recent world events have revealed a conflict between the belief that everyone is equally worthy and the belief that only some are worthy and the rest are dispensable. We support the right of everyone to live free of oppression and deprivation. What we want for ourselves, we want for all. (<https://www.adler.ca/>)

However, challenging inequality requires action, not just declarations, as required by a broader interpretation of the superordinate principle of social interest. Ansbacher (1991/1968) suggests that, in addition to the subjective side of social interest, or feeling empathy for the concerns of others, there is also a pragmatic element: “Thus more important than a mere *interest* in the interests of others would be corresponding *actions* – the processes of cooperation with and contribution to others.” (p. 39) This is also echoed in coaching’s emphasis on action and accountability (see ICF competency 11, <https://coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2017/12/CoreCompetencies.pdf>). Adler’s emphasis on trusting concrete action was phrased by Adlerian Dan Eckstein (1947-2013) as, “Believe the tongue in the shoe, not the tongue in the mouth” (personal communication, 2010).

Co-author Page coached a CEO who had hired a curriculum expert to design and lead diversity training for the organization’s staff. The expert, whom we will call Peter, had an outstanding research background on topics of diversity and inclusion and came with glowing reviews from academic supervisors. The CEO was impressed with the program Peter proposed. However, it became apparent during implementation that Peter did not put into practice the principles that he espoused in theory. Although he was respectful to the CEO and senior management, he was rude and dismissive toward anyone with less authority or in an “inferior” position, unless they were willing to serve him. The resulting atmosphere among staff and faculty became anything but collaborative. Adler’s focus on action, or “movement,” helped the CEO clarify how the disjuncture between Peter’s espoused and his enacted principles contributed to the poisonous atmosphere in the organization. Despite being offered opportunities for coaching, Peter was unwilling to make the necessary changes and was fired.

Coaching organizations are grappling with the challenge of inequality. For example, the Association of Coach Training Organizations (ACTO) held a “Calling in Power and Privilege Summit” of coach trainers in Toronto in September, 2017. In building efforts to take action toward goals of equality, the question becomes, “whom can I trust to understand that we all advance more together than separately?” The answer lies in honestly and courageously evaluating the consequences of our joint efforts. Those who contribute useful actions toward our common goals, not just words, qualify as trustworthy team members.

Eternity Challenge

The third challenge to coaching is related to a portion of Adler’s definition of social interest that is not limited to feelings of empathy (kinship with others and their interests) or of contribution (taking action toward those common interests). Adler goes even deeper by invoking as an element of social interest the philosophical principle put forth by Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677): *Sub specie aeternitatis*, from a universal perspective - universal in the sense of both time and space (Adler, 1956). "We are living on the crust of this poor planet, earth, and nowhere else" (Adler, 1931, p. 5) Against this criterion, what would a critical evaluation of coaching conclude?

Contemporary predictions of environmental disaster (ICC, 2018) suggest that earth could become uninhabitable by humans in the foreseeable future. From the perspective of the last few humans alive after such a catastrophe, what would they say about previous activities, such as ours today, that promoted that disaster or did nothing to stop it?

David Rock & co-author Page (2009) surveyed how systemic thinking contributed to the emergence of coaching in the late 20th century. In later presentations to coaches, co-author Page found there was considerable *knowledge* and cognitive acceptance of systemic concepts such as “everything is connected to everything.” However, the ability to *feel* for systems beyond our own bodies is less common.

Animals have evolved as physical systems that react to localized harm by signaling pain that generalizes through the whole organism. Even though our big toe is located at the farthest point from our brains, “when our feet hurt, *we* hurt,” as the old adage goes. Human beings have also developed the capacity to feel pain when we experience social exclusion (Lieberman, 2007) in the same area of the brain as when we are physically injured. As a result, we are able to use pain as an indication of harm to our bodies or to our social selves that needs attention. The feeling of pain is a call to action and, though not in itself desirable, a signal that helps keep us safe.

At this point in our evolutionary history, it is much easier to ignore suffering located far away among people supposedly very different from us than it is to ignore a sore toe. Yet, as pointed out above (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; Stiglitz, 2013) and emphasized by Adler (1966), suffering from inequality anywhere is a threat to all of us, everywhere. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2018) claims that we are facing a reasonably near-term threat to the existence of humanity. We may not feel pain directly, but it is no less a threat. Can we devise another feedback mechanism that matches pain’s call to action? Co-author Page has suggested the term “systempathy” for *consciously developed* feelings that motivate us to identify and heal threats to physical and social systems, whether near or far, close or distant (Page, 2013).

Coaches are trained to engage in respectful dialogue. We could use our action and accountability competencies to support whistleblowers and investigative journalists who are attempting to uncover socially damaging actions by individuals, organizations, or states. Our considerable organizational acumen could be used to help organize community action or unions. Meeting existential threats such as climate change cannot be achieved by single individuals acting separately, and coaching has a role to play. Dialogue such as that promoted by the Transformative Leadership and Coaching (TLC) Interest Section of the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology (NASAP - <https://www.alfredadler.org>) can provide a forum for gleaning further wisdom from Grandfather Adler.

Conclusion

In developing and introducing a coach training program for AGPS in 1998, non-Adlerian curriculum designers discovered that basic coaching principles overlap almost entirely with Adlerian systemic and humanistic assumptions. The coach trainers declared that Alfred Adler should be considered a grandfather of coaching, and this conclusion was supported in a subsequent survey of coaching pioneers. As the AGPS coaching program developed, it became clear that resolving the seeming conflict between one's individual interests and those of others, via social interest, is a key to developing human potential, a prime goal of coaching. Coaching, along with all the world, currently faces urgent ethical, equality, and eternity challenges. We propose using Adlerian principles of psychology of use, ironclad logic of social living, and *sub specie aeternitatis* as guides to expanding the usefulness of coaching in meeting those challenges.

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