Freud and Alder on the Human Relationship to Society

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It has been accepted by most psychologists that humans are social animals. They depend on each other not only for physical support, but for psychological support as well. Psychologists Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler have slightly different ideas about the human relationship to each other and society and the function of that relationship. For Freud, humans are much more individualistic in the sense that they are driven by self-interest and the pleasure principle. Civilization causes in people unhappiness because it creates more frustration. In the case of Adler, he argues that humans have an instinct to be social and to work together for the betterment of society. Adler’s concept of “striving for superiority” is the idea that because humans are weak and vulnerable on their own, they have an instinct to contribute to society to make it better. In return, the society will ideally give back to the individual. Freud does, however, have some similar ideas to the social instinct with his ideas on group psychology, in which, he argues, individuals surrender their narcissism in order to become part of the group. These ideas are relevant ideas today in determining the relationship that humans have to the current, post-modern society. Especially in American culture, individualism and competition are so highly valued. This seems to contradict Adler’s ideas on humans being primarily social beings, relying on each other for success. It seems to coincide more with Freud’s theories of people being generally narcissistic, pursuing self-interest. Although Freud and Adler do share some similarities in their ideas of humans as social beings, they have many differences, as Freud believes that humans are mainly driven by individual desires while Adler believes that humans have an instinct to be social and even altruistic.

Freud’s theories overall seem to suggest that he believes that humans are mainly individualistic and are concerned with their own self-interests. Freud divided personality into three parts: the id, ego and superego. The superego represents our moral self, the socially acceptable self. The id represents the dark side of human nature, containing drives and instincts, and supplies all of psychic energy to the other structures. The ego acts as a mediator between the id and superego (Shultz, 2009). Freud describes the relationship between the ego and the id as “a man on horse-back, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse” (Freud, 1960a – id,ego). Essentially, the individual is subconsciously spending their life in an attempt to control their selfish desires and instincts, often unsuccessfully, as the instincts (and thus, the id) are stronger than the ego. Furthermore, Freud describes how civilization is the very cause of much of human suffering. For him, reverting back to primitive ways of being would eliminate the suffering caused by the creation of civilization. A person becomes neurotic as a result of frustrations arising from society and its cultural values (Freud, 1961). The process of becoming part of civilization, in regards to relationships with other human beings, includes the regulation of the way humans interact with other humans. This means that the individual must restrict himself or herself from potentially gaining satisfaction from these relationships (Freud, 1961). The human construct of justice is what prevents people in society from escaping these restrictions of what they can and cannot do with other human beings. For example, a man might see his female neighbor as a potential object of sexual pleasure, but within the restrictions of civilization, he cannot simply go over and engage in sexual intercourse with her without her consent because in society this is defined as rape. Without civilization and thus without justice, the concept of “rape” would be no barrier to the man achieving his sexual pleasure. Freud is essentially arguing that humans see other humans as a means to an end. The other person is merely an object of one’s pleasure or a barrier to that pleasure. In most cases though, civilization, and the constructs that come along with it, are what act as barriers to human pleasure. It can be concluded that Freud is arguing that humans are mainly individualistic, and that society creates unhappiness because it takes away from individualism and replaces it with a collective set of rules and regulations that restrict the individual’s ability to achieve pleasure and satisfaction.

Adler makes the argument that humans are instinctually social beings, and that a healthy individual will strive to contribute to society. According to Adler, man is “not strong enough to live alone. He can offer only little resistance to nature” (Adler, 1928). Since humans are weak compared to other animals in nature, they are born with an innate sense of inferiority. The result of this feeling of inferiority is striving for superiority (Adler, 1928). Adler came up with the idea of “Gemeinschaftsgefuhl”, which is an innate potentiality for altruistic behavior, so that the individual will contribute to society for the betterment of the society (La Voy, et. al). In this sense, the individual is measured with the criteria determined by the value that the individual contributes to mankind in general (Adler, 1928). Adler disagrees with Freud in that the individual is always seeking love directed toward the self, but rather that the individual is always directing love towards others. This can be seen as early as in infancy, as the baby searches for tenderness in adults (Adler, 1928). However, Adler does specify that this innate tendency for being social and altruistic is but a potentiality. For it to become actualized, it must be developed (Adler, 1964). For Adler, striving for superiority achieves the goal of an ideal community, and everything that is considered important and valuable in life is the result of the social feeling (Adler, 1964). It is clear that Adler has a much more positive view of human nature, especially in regards to how humans interact with other humans. For Freud, humans are selfish and individualistic, but for Adler, the only way that humans can even exist is for them to be collective, rather than individualistic, and altruistic, rather than selfish. In addition to having animalistic instincts, humans have an instinct for sociality and altruism, which is manifested in Gemeinschaftsgefuhl. While for Freud, society acts as a barrier to human pleasure, for Adler, society is the very means for which humans are able to thrive.

Freud’s theories of group psychology are similar to Adler’s social interest in that the individual in both cases surrenders their narcissistic tendencies in order to become part of a group and for that group to benefit from the individual. Freud defines narcissism as “the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated…” (Freud, 1914). He argues that once an individual becomes part of a group, the individual gives up their narcissism. In most normal circumstances, personal self-interest is the main, if not the only, motivation, but this personal self-interest is very rarely seen in groups (Freud, 1960b-group). This suggests that by giving up personal interest and individual thoughts and ideas, the individual is striving to be at harmony with the group, rather than oppose it or stand out from it (Freud, 1960b- group). This is strikingly similar to Adler’s Gemeinschaftsgefuhl, which is the innate tendency to act altruistically. Members of society make use of their skills by making contributions to society, to better it. The rewards may not be reaped immediately, or even during the individual’s lifetime, but the individual contributes, regardless. Although Freud makes the argument overall that humans are selfish and self-seeking, he still believes that they give up their selfish tendencies within groups and begin to act in accordance with the group. This, along with Adler’s notions of social instincts seem to suggest a definite innate desire to be among other humans rather than to be alone.

Today’s post-modern society encourages individualism that results in an overall more unhappy society. Evidence from Naroll (1983) suggests, “close knit pre-modern societies have low rates of homicide, suicide, delinquency, divorce, child abuse and wife-beating and are characterized by good mental health” (Ruut, 1998). In addition to this, evidence from Jenkins et. al (1991) suggests that the rate of depression is much higher in western and westernized cultures (Ruut, 1998). This is contradictory to Freud’s theories on humans being primarily selfish and that society acts as a barrier to pleasure. Current society promotes individualism, but it yields unhappy individuals, overall. This seems to align better with Adler’s theory on humans’ social instinct. Humans need each other to survive, rather than to compete with each other. The competitive nature of society results in unhappy individuals because rather than working together towards a common goal of creating a harmonious society, individuals are encouraged to compete against his fellow man.

Although Freud and Adler share some common ground when theorizing on the human relationship to society and other humans, they differ greatly. For Freud, humans are intrinsically individualistic and at the mercy of their id, which comprises of all of their basic drives and instincts. Other humans are seen as a means to an end and society is seen as a barrier preventing the individual from achieving the pleasures that the id desires. Adler argues for the social instinct of humans. Humans need each other to survive, and this need is manifested in the innate potentiality for altruism. Alone, the individual is weak and vulnerable, but together humans are strong and powerful and have the potential for success. It is evident in today’s society that by striving to achieve individuality, the individual feels isolated and alone, resulting in psychological disorders like depression. This has serious implications for how today’s society is structured. The basis of capitalism is competition and success in today’s world is measured by individualistic achievements. Not only is the result of this kind of society an unequal class structure, but fundamentally unhappy individuals. In a world full of competition and individualism, the need for collectivism and human sociability does not disappear, but manifests itself in feelings of loneliness and depression.

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