Where Is He Coming From? Where Is He At? Contemporary Clinical Questions and Individual Psychology

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In contemporary clinical practice it is common to hear therapists, supervisors, and consultants discussing a patient in today's parlance, asking, "Where is he coming from? Where is he at?" These two questions seem to be the core of what Maslow (1962) referred to as the emergent "third force" in psychotherapy, the product of a dialectic process that is moving away from the mechanistic and reductionistic nature of both the behaviorist and psychoanalytic traditions. It is no coincidence that Maslow places Adlerian theory at the forefront of this movement.

The questions "Where is he coming from?" and "Where is he at?" imply a view of man as a self-directed, teleological organism rather than a product of instinctual drives or reinforcement contingencies. Adler anticipated these contemporary questions in his concepts of lifestyle and social interest.

The colloquial question "Where is he coming from?" is quite compatible with Adler's concept of lifestyle. When therapists consider this question, they are essentially attempting to understand the meaning of an individual's behavior, thoughts, and feelings in the light of his phenomenological existence and history. In other words, although a person's behavior may not make common sense to us, it may make very good sense and be quite understandable in terms of his present and past phenomenological view of himself, his life, and the people in it. It is precisely the person's phenomenological existence with which the concept of lifestyle is concerned.

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Hans Vaihinger's (1925) book, *The Philosophy of "As If"*, is recognized as having been influential in the development of Adler's thinking. Vaihinger's theme was that man established certain systems or schematic ways of thinking or viewing things that he then assumes are "true." An example would be the creation of meridians on a globe and then proceeding "as if" these fictional lines had a counterpart in reality. According to Vaihinger, while meridians and such are not physical realities, such creations are useful fictions. Life and sanity itself can be seen to hinge on our behaving as if our created fictions were true.

Following Vaihinger's ideas, Adler (1926) in *The Neurotic Constitution* suggested that the triad of human behavior—namely, actions, thoughts, and feelings—can be viewed as proceeding along the "as if" dimension. That is, by the age of 5 or 6, each person in his attempts to adapt to the environment that confronts him and to overcome his actual or felt weaknesses creates for himself an idealized goal "as if" only it could offer him a true measure of success, security, and happiness. For Adler, the person's goal was the center of his lifestyle.

As it has evolved in the writings of Adler and his followers, the contemporary concept of lifestyle includes the individual's idiosyncratic goals of security, success, and happiness as well as his private script or method of operation, which is his unique way of achieving these private goals. It involves what Dreikurs (1950) has called the person's "private logic"; that is, his personal rationalizations and self-attributed motives, his personal evaluation of his environment, and his own ethical values.

When therapists consider the above subjective phenomena of their clients, they can more readily and accurately assess where a person is "coming from" with his present behavior, conflicts, and problems. An individual never violates his lifestyle goals. He will develop symptomatic behavior if contemporary situations put him in conflict with attaining these goals. By understanding an individual's lifestyle, a therapist can understand why the particular stress represented a crisis for this person, how it affected significant others, and what the potential gains are for the client. The lifestyle *is* where a person is coming from.

In clincial practice the question "Where is he at?" is commonly used in an attempt to locate an individual along a spectrum. Although many symptomatic or attitudinal dimensions can be viewed in this regard, Adler's concept of social interest seems to be particularly well-suited for determining where someone is at in terms of his adjustment.

Dreikurs (1950) succinctly described social interest as "the capacity for give and take." As is so often the case, a phrase that is pregnant with meaning can seem to be oversimplified. Dreikurs further described social interest as the

ability to contribute, to be interested in one's fellow man, and give without necessarily expecting to receive in return and as the capacity to cooperate. Subjectively, it is expressed in the individual's feeling of being a part of or membership in the fellowship of man, the community, and the family.

In group therapy, for example, therapists can assess where a patient is at in relation to the development of social interest by the quality of his interactions with his fellow group members. Is he genuine in the expression of his feelings and comments? Is he so preoccupied with himself that he does not hear others, that he does not reach out to others, that he takes the group's attention away from others and repeatedly focuses it on himself? Is he sincerely concerned about the group and its members? Is he using the group setting inappropriately to further his misguided and socially useless goals? These and many other questions are asked when therapists ponder "Where is he at?" All of these questions relate to the expression and development of social interest in an individual.

All too often in the sensitivity-encounter group movement the focus is on a person identifying or "getting in touch with" his feelings and then letting them out—"Let it all hang out." Frequently, little attention is given to man-in-community, to the impact on one's fellow man when someone begins to "let it all hang out." This is the unique contribution of asking "Where is he at?" from the Adlerian perspective of social interest. A person may grow beyond the cathartic release of feelings and emotions as he begins to search how to constructively integrate himself, a feeling as well as a thinking person, into the community of man.

Not only are the questions "Where is he coming from?" and "Where is he at?" contemporary expressions of the concepts of lifestyle and social interest, but also the frequency with which they appear on the contemporary clinical scene reflect a movement away from the technical jargon so long associated with both the psychoanalytic and behaviorist schools of psychotherapy. A major characteristic of the so-called "third force" (Maslow, 1962) has been to bring an understanding of the helping process to the common person. This current interest in making the concepts of assessment and therapy understandable to the people involved is the realization of an effort advocated by Adler 50 years ago.

References

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