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Life Style as Solution: Life Style as Problem

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According to Adler, individuals are motivated “to belong” in the human community welfare of human society. Under ideal conditions, the way one finds a place among others is through self-determined striving for useful accomplishment; growth, development, and mastery of skills and talents; and cooperation with circumstances and tasks. In so doing one creates for oneself high self-esteem and an expectation of competency among others. Indeed, an individual may feel inferior in comparison with the goals towards which he or she strives, especially if ambitious, but not necessarily with regard to others. Embeddedness and bonding with others represents a horizontal social striving with one’s social equals. Belonging and contribution together make up the fundamental human motivation under ideal social training and attitudes. Under such circumstances one would choose to be an ordinary person, ideally flexible within limits of abilities.

If a child grows up with a conviction of a firm, accepted, and acceptable place in the family, and subsequently in the larger community, his or her strivings will be to contribute usefully to the welfare of the community. Under less fortunate and more usual circumstances, in the West, a person strives for more individualistic goals. If a child has drawn the conclusions that he or she is not respected or worthy, that he or she is not good enough as is, or that he or she does not have a place, he or she will direct energies to finding a place and to seeking some way to become outstanding in order to belong. Instead of knowing that one belongs, with its attendant security, and thus directing efforts towards contribution, one will be preoccupied with personal status and with efforts to show and to prove that one belongs. One attains symbolic and pyrrhic satisfaction rather than actual satisfaction.

Bringing an image of the ideal self with its future security and competence, or super-competence, into the frame of reference of the present provides a guiding line to serve as a mechanism compensatory to the fear of not belonging, as a source of consolation, as a template for deciding what activities are useful for training and self-training, and as a way to evaluate which social arrangements enhance self-esteem. This guiding line may, in turn, promote discouragement if it is held too rigidly and doggedly, or if it requires perfection. Thus, the concept a person has regarding whether or not he or she belongs and has a place (one’s self-concept) forms the ground for the kind of goals one sets for life (the self-ideal). The self-ideal, through which one believes one will finally have security and a place, in turn carries its own discouragement in the automatic failure to achieve the ideal. To compensate for this one tries harder.

The guiding line can be understood as a set of directions for the general problem of coping with and of adapting to one’s early life: the life style. Life henceforth

will be a succession of problems successfully solved, in which the life style sets the guideline for what is taken as a problem, as well as for their solutions. To belong, one needs to successfully solve the problem by which one knows one has a place. By trying to solve an unsolvable problem (unsolvable because one is trying to show something which one knows is not true - that one belongs) one appears to oneself and to others as if one belongs. One continually looks for the problem through the solution of which one shows that one belongs. We continually rehearse old solutions to belonging instead of dealing with our original discouragement.

In actuality, all children enter life with a task; given the family one is born into, how can one belong? Whether easy or difficult, life style is formed through a series of challenges a child encounters early in life and through his or her responses which “work” in the family to gain a place. The challenges the family presents include one’s birth order, constitution and gender, models, parental caretaking behavior, sibling behavior, family values, family atmosphere, and ambient culture. These require a response by a child, some of which will be successful and accepted by parents and siblings; other responses will be discouraged and the child responds to such discouragement by acceptance or defiance. Dynamically, a child responds to moves made by parents and siblings and every subjective experience of the child implies an underlying self-other or interpersonal context.

So life style becomes the accretion of behaviors and attitudes which “work” for the child to find a place in the family. It may “work” to be the one able to prevent conflict between parents. One’s present life style was once a solution to the problem of successful adaptation on a particular childhood situation where some behaviors were respected and others not. However, one must avoid thinking of life style apart from the person. A person does not have a life style in the sense of its being worn like a piece of clothing. To comprehend life style one must think in terms of pattern and movement. A person moves in his or her typical style in every situation; to know how to identify every thought, feeling, and action of that person as having a place in a coherent, unique pattern is to know life style. There is no “original person”, in Perls’ terms, or “authentic self” as with Horney. Our ordinary self is a conceptual model of an ideal realization in an ideal situation - that we do not have to struggle, strive, or compete to have worth to ourselves.

Accordingly, as therapists we want the peculiarities of a style of living to be recognized as an adaptation originally worked out in a situation where they “worked” well enough to seem appropriate. However narrow and unsuited for successful engagement with adult life in a wider community, behaviors and attitudes can be acknowledged as the best one could do, and as having been effective in adapting to the conditions of the client’s childhood.

And herein lies the rub. Given that people adopt “what works” as a child, guidelines for problem-solving, a discrepancy between our practiced style of living and a demand for a new solution to a novel and unexpected problem

will present a crisis. One simply does not know what to do. One is not aware of options. I've tried everything and nothing works!" The individual is no longer sure of him or herself and loses confidence in an ability to cope with circumstances. A "good" childhood cannot prevent a crisis, nor does a "bad" childhood produce one. Whenever such a discrepancy occurs, one's invisible loyalties produce a failure to understand the extent to which all the problems of life, being social problems, require flexibility and cooperation for their solution. A crisis faced also reveals courage enough to face a new problem in life, and hence to find a new solution - an opportunity to find a new concept of self-competence and to discard an old, no longer useful ideal. The latter is particularly evident in relationships where invisible loyalties and "what works" always fail and the demands for cooperation between partners are insistent.

Thus a client comes to a therapist with a "problem." The therapist's task is to reveal the problem as a solution to the problem of belonging which once worked but which now is a faulty solution to the common tasks of making friends, making a living, and making love. The substitutes for cooperation are all arrangements involving some form of coercion, to "make" others like one, to "make" a living, or to "make" love. When the social meanings and consequences of the problem are clear, it can make sense to the client and he or she is able to consider changes.

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