



# **A Guide for Explaining Social Interest to Laypersons**

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Perhaps the most fundamental tenet of Individual Psychology is that of social interest (Ansbacher, 1968). The concept's significance to Adlerian theory insures its prominence in discussions by counselors and psychologists providing Adlerian consultation to teachers and parents. It is the purpose of this article to provide Adlerian consultants with a practical means of helping their clients to understand the meaning of social interest. The author has found it fruitful to explain social interest to teachers and parents by delineating the concept according to its behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. It is assumed that each of these three components has the potential to influence the strength of the other two components, as well as the equal potential to be influenced by the other two components. Thus, what one does can influence what one feels and thinks, and what one feels and thinks can influence what one does. This type of interaction has been discussed by Bandura (1978) in his model of the interaction among behaviors, cognitions, and environmental factors.

## **Behaviors Associated with Social Interest**

1. "Helping behavior" means a willingness to use one's abilities, knowledge, or talents in order to aid others. Examples of helping behavior include: guiding someone new in one's neighborhood to the address he/she is seeking; caring for someone who is ill or disabled; volunteering one's services, such as removing snow from a neighbor's driveway, taking in a friend's mail while he/she is away on vacation, trying to teach a classmate who is having trouble with his/her lessons, or offering to introduce a new neighbor to some of one's friends.

2. "Sharing behavior" is a willingness to provide others with some of one's own possessions. Examples of sharing behavior include: permitting others to borrow one's tools, toys, or books; offering one's friends some of the candy in one's lunch-bag; or donating money to charity.

3. "Participating behavior" suggests joining in group activities. Examples include: being active in social clubs, political organizations, sport clubs; a student attending various extra-curricula activities; and voting in local, state, or federal elections.

4. "Respectful behavior" is the willingness to show others recognition of their human rights, knowledge, or experience. Examples of respectful behavior include: listening to another person express him/herself without interrupting; not interfering with the religious practices of others that may be different from one's own; not laughing at a classmate who gave the teacher a wrong answer to a question; a new teacher paying attention to the advice offered by an experienced colleague concerning appropriate classroom activities for the first day of class; and remembering to use the words, "please," "thank you," and "you're welcome."

5. "Cooperative behavior" implies a willingness to work or play together with others in order to reach mutual benefits and/or goals. Adlerian theory places particular importance on cooperation, as indicated for example, by Adler's (1938) statement, "All the problems of human life . . . demand capacity for cooperation and preparation for it—the visible sign of social feeling" (p. 284). Examples include: adhering to rules and regulations in the workplace, in the classroom, or in play; following through with one's responsibilities for completing assignments; or doing one's share in the division of labor to which many tasks lend themselves, such as housecleaning, supervision of one's children, preparing food for a potluck dinner party, or doing one's share in preparing notes for a student study group. The relationship between cooperation and "the division of labor" was stressed by Adler (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964), who stated, "It was only because men learned to cooperate that the great discovery of the division of labor was made, a discovery which is the chief security for the welfare of mankind" (p. 132).

6. "Compromising (or flexible) behavior" assumes a willingness to "give and take," in the hope of reaching mutually acceptable solutions to conflicts or problems. Compromising usually involves the readiness to adjust one's behaviors, attitudes, ideas, or expectations in order to accommodate to the requirements and/or demands of certain situations. Examples include: siblings deciding among themselves a schedule for giving each one private time with the home computer (assuming that each one wanted to use the computer at the same time) teachers agree-

ing on the institution of smoking and no smoking areas in their school lounge, or representatives of a labor force agreeing to withdraw demands for pay increases in order to secure a commitment from management not to dismiss any workers.

7. "Empathic behavior" shows others that their thoughts and feelings are understood and appreciated. Adler (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) stated, "Individual psychology may claim as its contribution to have pointed out that empathy and understanding are facts of social feeling. . . . It is one aspect of social interest and is absolutely essential to the achievement of social living" (p. 136). Examples include: Telling others that one notices how they are feeling or thinking about something; using physical gestures to communicate identification with others, such as putting one's arm around the shoulder of an unhappy friend, or smiling with someone who has just received some good news; and emphasizing the words, "You seem to feel. . . ," and "you seem to think. . . ," in interacting with others. In their discussion on effective ways of communicating with children, Dinkmeyer & McKay (1976) suggest how parents can learn to express empathy to their children.

8. "Encouraging behavior" is behavior that helps to motivate others. Examples include: a special education teacher emphasizing to a student all the progress made by the student; a father telling his child that he is sure he or she will do his or her best in the baseball game after the child expressed concern over his or her ability; a principal telling one of his or her teachers how creative the reading lesson was; a counselor helping parents appreciate the successes that they have had in raising their children; or a teenager telling a friend how much everyone enjoyed the friend's guitar-playing at a party. The concept of encouragement has been widely discussed in Adlerian literature pertaining to counseling methods (Dinkmeyer, Pew, & Dinkmeyer, 1979) and parent-child interactions (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1973; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976).

9. "Reforming behavior" strives to improve social conditions for the common good. Reforming behavior usually involves taking the initiative to expose problems, and then devoting time and investing effort toward ending or ameliorating the problems (usually by meeting with people, educating people, and influencing people). Examples include: school psychologists successfully convincing their school board to fund a group counseling program for the children of single parents; the civil rights protests, marches, and "sit-ins" of the 1960's; citizens petitioning their state legislature to pass laws requiring factories to reduce the amount of pollutants they release into the atmosphere; or teachers prevailing upon local retailers to consider giving appropriate jobs to mentally retarded citizens. The place of reforming behavior in Adlerian theory is illustrated

by the following statement by Adler (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1973):

... man is inviolably guided by the community ideal. The reason is that man is punished, praised, and advanced by it, so that each individual becomes not only responsible for each deviation, but must also suffer for it. This is a hard law, virtually a cruel law. Those who have already developed in themselves a strong social feeling constantly endeavour to ameliorate the hardships of anyone who proceeds erroneously (p. 37).

Although there may appear to be some overlap between several of the above categories of behavior associated with social interest (e.g., cooperating and compromising, participating and reforming, empathizing and encouraging), each category represents a different emphasis. In addition, possible overlapping in categories does not imply equivalence in behaviors. For example, one may be cooperative, but not at all engaged in compromising behavior, or one can participate in social activities, and not at all be engaged in reforming behaviors.

It helps to explain to people that social interest is best fostered in a sharing environment wherein all parties not only express it but encourage it in others. In addition, the understanding of the concept is enhanced if it is explained that the first eight behaviors described above are concerned with the daily demands of the three life-tasks (work, friendship, love); whereas the behavior of reforming more reflects the idealism of the individual, and is oriented toward a better future. Thus, the individual who expresses social interest according to the above behaviors is both a realist (one who understands the demands of a social life) and an idealist (one who strives to improve existing social situations) (Dreikurs, 1953). Finally, it is beneficial to indicate that some of the behaviors associated with social interest begin to occur in early childhood (e.g., helping, sharing), and other-behaviors begin to be expressed more in later childhood and adolescence (e.g., empathy, compromising).

### **Feelings Associated With Social Interest**

1. "Belonging" is the feeling that one is a member of a group or groups (e.g., family, peer group, group of colleagues). The individual feels that he/she has a secure place in a social organization. The feeling of "belonging" has been discussed as a primary human need in the Adlerian literature (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979).

2. "Feeling at home" implies feeling at ease and feeling comfortable when interacting with others. This feeling helps the individual to feel secure and free from anxiety during conversations, formal addresses, parties, or interviews, for example.

3. "Communality" is the feeling of having characteristics in common with others and of being in many ways similar to others. This is a feeling that one is more similar to others than different from others regarding the demands of the life-tasks (work, love, friendship) and all of the joys and problems pertaining to these tasks (Adler, 1958). In addition, one feels similar to others in terms of human needs, such as the "need to belong" (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979) or the "needs to be loved and respected," as discussed by Maslow (1968) as part of his hierarchy of human needs. Finally, the individual identifies with others in regard to feelings of imperfection and the striving to improve oneself (striving for perfection) (Adler, 1969; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1973).

4. "Faith in others" conveys the feeling that there is "goodness" and social interest in all people. One feels that everyone has "good" traits and something positive to contribute to others. In addition, there is a sense that others can be depended upon, both in the sense of being a source of help or encouragement and in the sense of trying to help and/or to improve themselves (perhaps with encouragement from others).

5. "The courage to be imperfect" is the feeling that making mistakes is a natural part of being human, and the feeling that one does not have to be always "the first," "the best," or the "most famous" in all of one's endeavors. Having "the courage to be imperfect" makes it easier for someone to interact with others and to be intimate with others, because the individual is not afraid of revealing his/her weaknesses. Furthermore, if someone feels "communality" with people in general, as well as feeling "faith in others" (as discussed above), it is easier to arouse within oneself the "courage to be imperfect." This is because one recognizes the shortcomings in all people, but also feels that he/she can depend on the goodwill, encouragement, and empathy of others. The concept of "the courage to be imperfect" is an important tenet in the Adlerian model of mental health (Dreikurs, 1953; Dreikurs, 1967), and has also been discussed by other theorists (Ellis, 1975; Pacht, 1984).

6. "Being human" is the feeling of being part of all humanity. Compared to the preceding feelings, that of "being human" is much more of an existential emotion. Adler (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) believed that the individual's social interest could be expanded "and in favorable cases extends not only to family members, but to the larger group, to the nation, to all of mankind" (p. 138).

7. "Optimism" is the feeling that the world can be made a better place in which to live. The individual has the feeling that it is generally possible to produce positive changes in people and to improve problematic situations. This feeling of "optimism" orients the individual toward a better future, and away from dwelling on past or present difficulties.

It is worthwhile to explain that the first five feelings are experienced more in the everyday world of the three life-tasks, whereas the last two feelings ("being human," "optimism") reflect more of an overall attitude toward life. These last two feelings are more in the realm of the philosophical and the spiritual. Furthermore, it can be stated that the feelings discussed above serve as sources of motivation for the previously discussed behaviors associated with social interest. For example, if a youngster has the feeling of "belonging," it should be easier for him/her to engage in "sharing" and "helping" behaviors.

### **Cognitions (Thoughts) Associated with Social Interest**

1. "As a human being, my rights and obligations in the society are equal to the rights and obligations of others." The individual understands that he/she is equal to others in terms of what is expected of him/her (as a responsible citizen) as well as in terms of what is due him/her. In one's daily interactions with others, one does not expect biased treatment (either positive or negative).

2. "My personal goals can be attained in ways consistent with the welfare of the community." This cognition involves the belief that one can succeed in achieving one's personal goals (e.g., social or career goals), while not ignoring or violating the need for others also to strive toward reaching their goals. Individuals with this understanding would likely endorse Adler's statement (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) that, "The only individuals who can really meet and master the problems of life, however, are those who show in their striving, a tendency to enrich all others, who go ahead in such a way that others benefit also" (p. 225).

3. "The prosperity and the survival of society are dependent on the willingness and the ability of its citizens to learn to live together in harmony." With this belief, the individual realizes the importance of cooperative and flexible behaviors to a peaceful society, and appreciates Adler's (1938) statement that, "The evolution of humanity was only possible because mankind was a community . . ." (p. 283).

4. "I believe in trying to respond to others as I would like them to respond to me." The individual accepts the biblical "golden rule," and values mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual justice. Someone with this belief would feel comfortable with the following statement by Adler (1938):

Surely, the command, "thou shalt not kill," and "love thy neighbor," can hardly ever disappear from knowledge and feeling as the supreme court of approval . . . these norms supply us with the plumbline by which

alone the right and wrong of all other goals and modes of movement opposed to evolution are to be valued (pp. 36–38).

5. “The ultimate measure of my character will be to what extent I promoted the welfare of the community.” This belief includes the conviction that one will be best remembered for his/her positive contributions to the lives of others. Pertaining to this cognition, Adler (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) stated:

What we call a good or a bad character can be judged only from the viewpoint of the community. Character, like any scientific, political, or artistic achievement, will prove its greatness and value only by being valuable to men in general. An ideal image by which we appraise the individual is created only by considering its value and its usefulness for man in general (pp. 130–131).

The individual realizes that his/her specific achievements will stand as reflections of his/her character as well as represent one’s lasting contributions to society. In this regard, Adler’s remarks (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) concerning geniuses are instructive, “Mankind only calls those individuals geniuses who have contributed much to the common welfare. We cannot imagine a genius who has left no advantage to mankind behind him” (p. 153).

It is helpful to explain that the first four cognitions relate to the immediate realm of the three life-tasks, whereas the fifth cognition is more future-oriented, having connotations of idealism and a philosophical orientation toward life. It is also worthwhile to indicate that people who demonstrate and feel social interest generally tend to accept the above cognitions as true.

In addition, the Adlerian consultant can explain that the more one behaves, feels, and thinks, as discussed above, the more social interest one has and the more the individual will be responded to positively by others. The more positive interactions the individual has, the higher his/her self-confidence. The higher one’s self-confidence, the more one demonstrates social interest. Thus, from the perspective of Individual Psychology, there is an interaction between social interest and self-confidence.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to emphasize that in each component of social interest (behavioral, emotional, cognitive), there is a concern for both present reality and for building a better future. In this sense, it can be said that an individual of high social interest is both practical and idealistic. However, the individual’s potential to express social interest, as discussed in this paper, must be encouraged by others. As Adler (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1973) stated, “Every human being brings the disposition for social interest with him; but then it must

be developed through upbringing, especially through correct guidance of the creative power of the individual" (p. 40).

Finally, the Adlerian consultant should emphasize that those individuals who behave, feel, and think as discussed above have not only a high degree of social interest, but, it is assumed, a high degree of mental health as well.

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### Reference Note

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Think of it. We are traveling on a planet, revolving around the sun, in almost perfect symmetry. We are blessed with technology that would be indescribable to our forefathers. We have the wherewithal, the know-it-all, to feed everybody, clothe everybody, give every human on Earth a chance. We dwell instead on petty things. We kill each other. We build monuments to ourselves. What a waste of time . . . Think of it. What a chance we have . . .

Buckminster Fuller

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