

Emotion in Individual Psychology

Individual Psychology views the individual as a unity, as opposed to a collection of personality traits, which add up to a total personality. The individual strives to overcome a felt minus or inferiority by setting a goal and a direction of movement. The individual is an indivisible whole, a body-mind unity, which itself is striving to belong to the larger unities of humanity and the cosmos. In this context – if the Adlerian premise is correct – emotion and feeling should emerge as an aspect of the individual's striving rather than as an independent force within the personality.

Subjectively to the individual, however, it usually appears otherwise. He is “overcome with emotion”, “ruled by emotion”, “rendered speechless with emotion”. He may see emotion as having such power over him that he “couldn't help it”, “my anger got the better of me and drove me to it”. Emotion enables the individual to deny responsibility for his own actions and to see himself as a victim of irrational forces outside of his control but residing within him.

Appearances are misleading. Ultimately we cannot make sense of human behaviour and character unless we accept that the individual is indivisible and responsible. The alternative view, in seeing personality as the mere sum of inputs, dissolves the individual into independent forces. In fact there cannot be an indivisible and responsible personality unless the individual is a self-guiding, goal-setting, choosing and self-determining entity.

What purposes do emotions serve in human life? They appear to mobilize the individual in the movement towards a goal. It is interesting that the very etymology of the word emotion alludes to a sense of movement: e = out, movere = move. Inherent in this is a sense of motion, a movement from one point to another, or a movement in a direction. Sometimes this movement can be a striving against movement, to stand still or hesitate. Sometimes it can be a retrograde motion.

Adler places the individual in his social setting, without which the individual is actually unthinkable. The individual is born, develops and matures in a social field. The sense or direction of this social field, acting like an all pervasive social gravity is Adler's *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, social interest, social awareness or community feeling. It is striking that Adler identifies this as a feeling, *Gefühl*. The individual's goal is revealed emotionally and expressed in action. This behaviour can at one extreme completely resonate with social interest; at the other extreme it can diametrically oppose social interest. The former could be seen as conjunctive and the latter as disjunctive.

I believe that it would be incorrect to classify the emotions themselves as conjunctive or disjunctive. They only have meaning or sense as a part or aspect of the whole movement of the person. It would be tempting to see love and admiration as conjunctive in

themselves but what about love and admiration for the *Führer* and a violently pursued ideal of racial purity? Clearly this love carried within it hatred and aggression. And would it be disjunctive to hate injustice and oppression, and to mobilize forces against them? Our actions, emotions and goals can only be evaluated by reference to the “absolute truth” of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*.

Emotion must always be present in everything the individual does, even though this may not always be obvious. The emotions express our evaluation of our situation and our intended response. As such we can expect emotion to be especially noticeable when the Lifestyle is under pressure from the environment. A person whose priority is the avoidance of stress and failure will react emotionally to impending dangers. His emotion will heighten his awareness of his peril, concentrate his whole being on dealing with the situation and mobilize all necessary inner forces to that end. At the same time it will close down awareness of other aspects of the environment that seem irrelevant.

The individual is a mind-body unity and the emotions directly express the mind-body link, as if they were thoughts expressed in the body. This is Adler’s *organ dialect* or what we would call today body language. We often talk of ourselves as being moved by experiences. Even memories can have this effect. A thought can be felt in its bodily effects. We know that we are in touch with some meaningful experience when we feel it in our bodies. This can be a quickening of the pulse, a start, nervous tension and heightened awareness. But also a threatening experience can make us go cold. It is this which may lead us to feel that we have no control over our emotions, and in a certain sense that is true. However, it is certain that we have caused our own emotion, only out of awareness. The Lifestyle and its overarching network of goals have been vigilant in the largely unconscious activity of securing our existence. We are only surprised that we can be mobilized for our own defense so swiftly and without our conscious intervention.

Adler once said that all the character traits, including the full range of possible emotions, are present from the beginning of our lives and that the Lifestyle represents the individual’s selection of a subset of these as the most promising for the conduct of his life. In this sense the Lifestyle is the more or less rigid concentration of one’s inner forces, a form of psychic sclerosis or inflexibility. This applies also to the individual’s range of emotions. Adler noted that as a person ages he acquires the face that he has produced by the emotions that play habitually in his features. The misanthropic will major in pessimistic and aggressive moods, which are emotions extended in time. He will dwell in such moods and mould his face and even his entire body to express them. For this reason, if we become skilled *Menschenkenner*, we can read the characters of our fellow men. It also raises the possibility that a movement can take place in the opposite direction: that the awareness of, say, a stiff posture or fixed facial expressions can reveal to the individual deeply ingrained habits of thought and attitude and spur him to reflect on how he is producing them. This possibility seems to me to be offered by such practices as Alexander Technique and certain martial arts. It is possible to become aware of one’s

mood by reading one's own body language. It is a commonplace that it is possible to effect changes in one's emotional state by making changes in one's body, for instance through exercise, going for a country walk and so forth. David K Reynolds recounts how he was once required professionally to pass as mentally ill in order to evaluate patient treatment in US mental health institutions. He was able through changing his posture and bodily attitude to turn himself into such a depressed individual as to gain admittance at these institutions as a genuine case, passing professional assessment. As he tells it he actually *was* a genuine case and at the end of the exercise would have to act upon himself in the opposite sense in order to become again the real David K Reynolds.

Of course, since they must be ever present, emotions play a very great role in Adlerian and all other counselling and psychotherapy. The Dreikursian *recognition reflex* itself is the emotional jolt that the client feels when a deep truth about himself is felt in his inner core. The emotional reaction reveals what is genuinely felt. We know that we are in touch with the client's soul, when we can feel the client's emotions. In telling their Early Recollections and other key material clients unfailingly reveal their emotional attitudes, which emphasize their Private Logics, their Biased Apperceptions and their systems of values. Furthermore the client feels this too: he realizes by his own reaction to what he says that these things have special significance to him. And by asking a client to retell an Early Recollection we can bring the client to revisit emotional states. One particular client of mine did not understand how deeply he resented his childhood treatment by his mother until certain events and situations were revisited in this way. When he *felt* this resentment again, he had to acknowledge that this feeling had been with him for all his life since childhood. Adler talks of the task of psychotherapy being to enable the client to feel the living truth. This truth can never be merely an idea. It is only a truth when it is felt.

Sometimes we describe psychotherapy and counselling as the talking cure, as if it were only a rational dialogue. The whole process is permeated and mediated by emotion. It is emotion which binds the joint activity of client and therapist. It is emotion which underpins the transference of the client and the counter-transference of the therapist. Every significant event in psychotherapy is an emotional event. The relationship between therapist and client, if it is successful, is rooted in emotional bonds of trust and acceptance.

Adler also said that feelings are no arguments. Clients and people in general, who need to absolve themselves of responsibility for their own actions, are happy to identify their feelings as independent of their will. In truth they are not independent of our will but are seemingly independent of our conscious control. They appear to our conscious minds as clouds that have blown in to darken our internal sky. But the mind has produced them and the mind can, by taking back responsibility, blow them away. Feelings fade. When they appear not to be fading, it is because we are keeping them in existence, feeding their fire because they suit our purposes. I think of a the client who kept alive a

deep resentment against his mother because it justified his lack of achievement and his failure to mature. It supported his system of self pity and victimhood, which absolved him from the responsibility to play his full part in life. He could claim special consideration from the world in general. It was only when he felt that resentment that he understood its poisonous effects. As he moves on from that old position that client is visibly freed from the necessity of continuously producing and reinforcing the feelings of resentment and self pity.

Recently a client gave me an Early Recollection which recalled her as a child, not wishing to go to a party to face a possible humiliation of rejection by other children, hiding under a bed. her sadness and misery were tangible. A nagging feeling that I had missed something led me to revisit this Early Recollection one week later, sensing a deeper purpose. The purpose of the hiding was to be found, comforted and helped. The client smiled in recognizing this – and remembered in addition her childish disappointment when her father came into the room and failed to notice her!

The Lifestyle may be thought of as a security system, identifying life's great dangers and erecting the defensive measures that must be tended to keep the person safe. Part of this system is a constant watch on the perimeter to identify the approach of danger. The person shows this in the irritations he is subject to. The person who feels loss of control *must* react when his sense of control is threatened. The person who needs to feel meaningful *must* react when his inferiority is at risk of being exposed. The pleaser *must* avert any feeling of rejection or non-acceptance. The emotion at the base of all of this is a deep existential anxiety, rendering the person eternally watchful and vulnerable. At the other end of the spectrum is the person who feels at peace with the world, accepted and self-accepting and whose basic emotion comes closest to the full development of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*.