



# A Scale for Social Interest

James E. Crandall

Ansbacher (1968) refers to social interest as Adler's cardinal characteristic, having a pervasive influence on a wide variety of other personal traits and attitudes. According to Adler, social interest functions as the best safeguard against intense feelings of inferiority, and along with the related concepts of courage and common sense, is seen as the main determinant of man's master motive, striving for superiority. With social interest, this striving will be toward confronting real problems and contributing to the welfare of mankind, whereas without it the individual will seek a personal, self-centered superiority (Adler, 1956, pp. 154–155, 240–241).

In view of the central importance of social interest to Individual Psychology, it was surprising to find that there apparently has been no attempt to develop a standardized measure of the concept. The purpose of the present research was to develop such a scale.

## Rationale and Development of Scale Items

**Definition of Social Interest.** Adler's concept of social interest has been given various interpretations by different individuals. The concept is highly complex, with so many ramifications that it does not yield easily to operational definition.

Ansbacher (1968) has differentiated between the object and process dimensions. The object dimension refers to the definition of "social," whereas the process dimension relates to the meaning of "interest." With regard to the former, interpretations range from narrow to broad. In its broadest sense, or most fully developed form, social interest involves

an affirmative attitude not only toward all humanity, but may also extend to the whole universe (Adler, 1959, p. 46).

Ansbacher's preference for defining social interest as an "interest in the interests of mankind" (1968, p. 148) provides a basis for the present approach. Using this definition, it then becomes an empirical question whether or not social interest is associated with an optimistic, affirmative attitude toward life in general.

With regard to the process dimension, it seems that Adler meant to include all of the classical tri-partite conception of human nature: thinking, feeling, and acting (cf. O'Connell, 1965). Concerning cognitive processes, Adler (1973, pp. 42-43) emphasized the importance of the individual developing an empathic understanding of others. Also, social interest was viewed as essential to common sense. The feeling aspect of social interest is clear in Adler's frequent references to a positive attitude toward others, concern for their welfare, and his discussion of true sympathy as the purest expression of social interest (Adler, 1959, p. 217). It is equally clear from Adler's writings that overt behavior is the crucial test of a person's social interest. The latter involves behavior directed toward contributing to the welfare of mankind (e.g., Adler, 1964, pp. 78-79).

**Construction of Scale Items.** The above considerations have guided the development of both the format and content of the present measure of social interest. The scale was designed to assess a person's interest in the interests or welfare of others. Items in this self-report measure were selected to represent relevant aspects of thinking, feeling, and behaving, although the relevance of the scale for overt behavior can be adequately assessed only by future research with it.

The instrument requires the individual to make a number of choices concerning which of two values he considers to be more important. Each pair of values includes one closely related to social interest and one less relevant.

A value-oriented approach was chosen for two reasons. First, an emphasis on values is consistent with the basic tenets of Individual Psychology (Ansbacher, 1968, p. 145). Second, it seemed that value choices might be less influenced by a social desirability response set, as compared to the more common technique of asking people to describe their own characteristics, typical behaviors, etc.

As a first step toward item selection, 90 personality trait words were culled from a list which provides mean ratings of general desirability for each trait (Anderson, 1968). Choosing among desirable traits only, traits with varying degrees of relevance for social interest were selected. A panel of eight psychology faculty and graduate students rated the 90 traits on a 7-point scale ranging from "no direct implications for social feeling or behavior" to "strong implications for social feeling or behavior."

The resulting ratings were used to form 48 pairs of traits. Some traits were used twice, in different combinations. Each pair was designed to equate, as nearly as possible, the general desirability of the two traits, while maximizing the difference in their relevance to social interest.

Item analysis has resulted in a 15-item scale, as shown in Table 1. Keyed items are underlined. The social interest score consists of the number of underlined characteristics chosen by the individual. The scale also includes nine buffer items, those pairs with no underlines.

**Table 1**  
Social Interest Scale  
Personal Trait Value Scale

---

Below are a number of pairs of personal characteristics or traits. For each pair, underline the trait which you value more highly. In making each choice, ask yourself which of the traits in that pair you would rather possess as one of *your own* characteristics. For example, the first pair is "imaginative-rational." If you had to make a choice, which would you rather be? Draw a line under your choice in each of the pairs.

Some of the traits will appear twice, but always in combination with a different trait. No pairs will be repeated.

---

"I would rather be . . . ."

imaginative - rational

helpful - quick witted

neat - sympathetic

level-headed - efficient

intelligent - considerate

self-reliant - ambitious

respectful - original

creative - sensible

generous - individualistic

responsible - original

capable - tolerant

trustworthy - wise

neat - logical

forgiving - gentle

efficient - respectful

practical - self-confident

capable - independent

alert - cooperative

imaginative - helpful

realistic - moral

considerate - wise

sympathetic - individualistic

ambitious - patient

reasonable - quick-witted

---

Copyright 1975, by James E. Crandell

**Scale Characteristics and Normative Data**

**Subject Samples.** Four samples have provided the data for this and the

following sections. The first two groups consisted of volunteers from introductory psychology classes. In both cases, subjects were tested in groups of six to eight, and received course credit for their participation. Group I involved 45 men and 40 women. Group II included 31 men and 15 women. Group III consisted of two high school psychology classes, with a total of 18 men and 27 women. Group IV comprised 17 male and 20 female students from an upper division psychology course.

**Reliability.** The split-half reliability for Groups I, II, and III, using the Spearman-Brown formula, was .77. Test-retest reliability over a five week period, involving Group IV, was .82.

**Normative Data.** The mean for all subjects was 8.43, with a standard deviation of 3.57. For the two sexes, the means were 8.91 for women and 8.00 for men. The corresponding standard deviations were 3.21 and 3.83. There were no significant differences between high school and university students. Range of possible scores is from zero to fifteen.

### Correlates of the Scale

Performance on the Social Interest Scale has been compared with some other instruments at this point. These were chosen to provide a variety of information concerning the potential validity of the scale.

**Peer Ratings.** The validity of any new personality scale must ultimately rest with behavioral correlates. A beginning has been made in this direction by relating social interest scores to peer ratings.

Ratings of peers for social interest were made by Group III after they had completed the social interest scale. They were instructed to choose the three people from their class whom they felt showed the greatest interest, liking, and concern for other people. After writing down their choices, they were requested to choose the three people who typically showed the least interest, liking, and concern for others. All choices were kept confidential. Their selections were to be made from members of their own sex present on that day.

An individual's rating consisted of the number of times he was mentioned as being high on social interest, minus the number of times selected as being low.

A correlation between Social Interest Scale scores and peer ratings of this kind would not be valid. Since a person's rating depended partly on the number of people available to choose him, it was necessary to form high and low criterion groups separately for each sex in each of the two classes. These were then combined to form a high criterion group con-

sisting of nine boys and 14 girls, and a low criterion group of nine boys and 13 girls.

The mean Social Interest Scale scores were 10.22 for the high criterion group and 6.86 for the low group. The results were highly significant ( $t = 3.60$ ,  $df = 43$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and lend support to the validity of the scale.

**Values.** The 18 terminal values of Rokeach's (1973) Value Survey provide a relatively broad assessment of values. It was hypothesized that, compared to people with low social interest, people with high scores would attribute relatively greater importance to the following values: peace, equality (Adler, 1959, p. 180), true friendship, and family security ("taking care of loved ones").

To test the hypothesis, the Value Survey was given to Group I. This test requires subjects to rank order the 18 values in terms of their importance. Significant correlations between social interest and values are shown in Table 2. Social interest correlated with peace, equality, and family security. Contrary to expectations, it did not correlate significantly with friendship.

**Table 2**  
Correlations between Social Interest and Other Variables

Group	N	Related Variables	r	p*
I	85	Rokeach Values:		
		Peace	.32	.005
		Equality	.30	.01
		Family Security	.43	.001
		Pleasure	-.41	.001
		Exciting Life	-.40	.001
		Purpose in Life	.32	.005
		Marlowe-Crowne Scale	.23	.05
II	46	Multiple Affect Adjective Check List:		
		Hostility	-.50	.001
		Anxiety	-.09	n.s.
		Depression	-.38	.02
		Philosophy of Human Nature:		
		Altruism and Trustworthiness	.32	.05

\*All significant levels involved two-tailed tests.

Subjects with low social interest scores gave relatively greater importance to pleasure and excitement. Although this was not anticipated, the results are not surprising. Pleasure and excitement, as defined in the Value Survey, appear to be more self-centered, hedonistic values, and therefore might well accompany low social interest.

To replicate the above results, subjects in Group III were asked to rank only the five values listed in Table 2. The median ranks of values of the 21 highest-scoring subjects on the Social Interest Scale were compared with the medians for the 21 lowest-scoring subjects. As before, high-scoring subjects attributed more importance to peace, equality, and family security, and less importance to pleasure and excitement than did the low-scoring subjects. For an overall test of significance, it was found that the median combined ranks for peace, equality, and family security were 6.75 for high-scoring subjects and 8.50 for the low-scoring subjects. This difference was significant according to the Mann-Whitney U test ( $z = 1.79$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

**Hostility, Anxiety, and Depression.** It was expected that social interest should, by definition, correlate negatively with experienced hostility. Also, as an important component of psychological adjustment, social interest could be expected to show negative correlations with anxiety and depression.

To test these hypotheses, the 46 subjects of Group II were given the "General," or trait form of the Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965). This test has separate scales for hostility, anxiety, and depression. The brief forms of the scales were used, since these have been found to be more independent of each other than the longer forms.

The correlations, shown in Table 2, were in the expected direction, but were significant only for hostility and depression.

**Beliefs About Other People.** To measure attitudes toward other people, two of the subscales from Wrightsman's (1964) Philosophy of Human Nature test were administered to Group II. The Altruism and Trustworthiness subscales were designed to measure the extent to which a person believes others to be altruistic and trustworthy. The two subscales were intermixed with buffer items taken from the Variability in Human Nature subscale. As shown by Table 2, the Social Interest Scale was associated with a favorable opinion of the trustworthiness and altruism of people in general.

**Perceived Meaningfulness of Life.** Whereas most of the foregoing results have been closely related to the core meaning of social interest, the present data concern a somewhat broader aspect of the concept.

Adler's discussions suggest that a well developed social interest should enhance the probability of a person finding life to be meaningful and worthwhile, and of being in harmony with the scheme of things. The Purpose in Life Test (PILT), developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) to measure the extent to which people find life to be meaningful, provides a means of testing this idea.

The PILT was administered to Group I. The correlation of .32 ( $p < .005$ ) with the Social Interest Scale supports the notion that social interest, narrowly defined, is positively related to an affirmative attitude toward life and to being in harmony with the universe (Adler, 1959, p. 46, 60; 1973, p. 43).

The PILT was originally developed to investigate some of Frankl's propositions concerning existential frustration. Frankl (1967, pp. 45 f.) has noted that self-transcendence, the finding of meaning and purpose outside of oneself, is necessary in order to avoid "existential vacuum." Thus, the present results may be interpreted as supporting both Adler and Frankl by suggesting that a commitment to other people is beneficial to finding meaning in life. O'Connell's (1970) discussion of some important similarities between Adler's social interest and Frankl's spirituality is relevant in this connection.

**Social Desirability Response Set.** Group I subjects completed the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) as a measure of the tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner. Although the correlation of this test with the Social Interest Scale was significant (see Table 2), it was small enough to suggest that the latter measure is not seriously influenced by social desirability response set. For example, the correlation of social interest with the PILT, with the possible effects of social desirability partialled out, was reduced only from .32 to .27.

**Birth Order.** Data from the first three groups have been combined to examine the relation between birth order and social interest. (Group IV was not requested to provide information on birth order.) The analysis was rather crude in that no information relating to the differences in ages of siblings was collected.

Three classes of ordinal position were used: first-born or only children, middle-born, and last-born. The means were significantly different for women ( $F = 3.59$ ,  $df = 2/79$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with middle-born women having higher scores than either first- or last-born women. This is consistent with Adler's (1956, pp. 376-382) view that the middle-born child usually has the best prospects for healthy development. However, the results for men were not significant.

The results for both men and women should be regarded as tentative

at this point. Where so many confounding variables are present, e.g., spacing, sex, and total number of siblings, much larger sample sizes are clearly desirable.

### Summary

Some initial steps in developing a measure of social interest have been completed. The resulting scale involves a value approach, requiring subjects to make a number of choices between values which are either relevant or irrelevant to social interest.

The focus of the scale is upon items which appear to relate to what Ansbacher (1968) has called an "interest in the interests of mankind." No attempt was made to directly assess such things as future orientation, courage, independence, or affirmative attitude toward life in general. The latter characteristics may either be considered to be components of social interest (cf. Ansbacher, 1968), or they may be conceived as related characteristics which are facilitated by social interest, more narrowly defined.

The present research strategy is to use a moderately narrow, and more easily manageable, definition of social interest, and then to empirically investigate its relations to constructs conceptually related to it in Individual Psychology.

Preliminary findings indicate reasonable internal consistency and test-retest reliability for the Social Interest Scale.

Several results establish the validity of the scale as a measure of social interest. Peer ratings were significantly related to scores on the scale. High social interest scores were associated with greater valuing of equality, peace, and family security, or taking care of loved ones. Low scores were accompanied by relatively greater valuing of excitement and pleasure, which seem to be more self-centered values. Scores on the scale were negatively correlated with hostility. Social interest also correlated with perceived altruism and trustworthiness in others. The Social Interest Scale correlated positively with the Purpose in Life Test, supporting Adler's view that social interest fosters or may extend to an affirmative attitude toward life in general. The scale correlated negatively with depression. However, the correlation with anxiety, while negative, was not significant.

Middle-born women were found to have significantly higher social interest scores than either first- or last-born women. Men showed no significant effects of birth order.

The scale is in need of further validation, especially in behavioral data. Hopefully, it will prove to be useful in investigating many of Adler's ideas concerning human nature.

**References**

---

- Adler, A. *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: a systematic presentation in selections from his writings*. H. L. & R. R. Ansbacher (Eds.). New York: Basic Books, 1956.
- Adler, A. *Understanding human nature*. New York: Premier Books, 1959.
- Adler, A. *Problems of neurosis*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964.
- Adler, A. *Superiority and social interest: a collection of later writings*. H. L. & R. R. Ansbacher (Eds.). New York: Viking Press, 1973.
- Anderson, N. H. Likableness ratings of 555 personality-trait words. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1968, 9, 272-279.
- Ansbacher, H. L. The concept of social interest. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 1968, 24, 131-149.
- Crowne, D. P., & Marlowe, D. *The approval motive: Studies in evaluative dependence*. New York: Wiley, 1964.
- Crumbaugh, J. C., & Maholick, L. T. An experimental study in existentialism: the psychometric approach to Frankl's concept of "noogenic neurosis," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 1964, 20, 200-207.
- Frankl, V. E. *Psychotherapy and existentialism*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1967.
- O'Connell, W. E. Humanistic identification: a new translation for Gemeinschaftsgefühl. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 1965, 21, 44-47.
- O'Connell, W. E. *Frankl, Adler, and Spirituality*. Paper presented at the Alfred Adler Centennial, New York, July 1970.
- Rokeach, M. *The nature of human values*. New York: Free Press, 1973.
- Wrightsmann, L. Measurement of philosophies of human nature. *Psychological Reports*, 1964, 14, 743-751.
- Zuckerman, M., & Lubin, B. *Manual for the multiple affect adjective check list*. San Diego, Calif.: Educational and Industrial Testing Service, 1965.

Copyright of Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research & Practice is the property of University of Texas Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.