The basic evil is invariably a lack of genuine warmth and affection.
—Karen Horney

Karen Horney: Neurotic Needs and Trends

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Karen Danielsen Horney was another defector from the orthodox Freudian point of view. Although never a disciple or colleague of Freud’s, Horney was trained in the official psychoanalytic doctrine. But she did not remain long in the Freudian camp.

Horney began her divergence from Freud’s position by disputing his psychological portrayal of women. An early feminist, she argued that psychoanalysis focused more on men’s development than on women’s. To counter Freud’s contention that women are driven by penis envy, Horney said that men are envious of women for their ability to give birth. “I know just as many men with womb envy as women with penis envy,” she said (quoted in Cherry & Cherry, 1973, p. 75).

She began her career by insisting that her work was an extension of Freud’s. In a letter she wrote, “I do not want to found a new school but build on the foundations Freud has laid” (quoted in Quinn, 1987, p. 318). By the time Horney completed her theory, her criticisms of Freud were so broad that she had founded a new school. Hers was a new approach to psychoanalysis that had little in common with Freud’s views.

Horney’s theory was influenced by her gender and her personal experiences, as well as by social and cultural forces that differed greatly from those that had influenced Freud. Horney formulated her theory in the United States, a radically different culture from Freud’s Vienna. By the 1930s and 1940s, major changes had occurred in popular attitudes about sex and the roles of men and women. These changes were taking place in Europe, too, but they were considerably more pronounced in the United States.

Horney found that her American patients were so unlike her previous German patients, both in their neuroses and in their normal personalities that she believed only the different social forces to which they had been exposed could account for the variation. Personality, she argued, cannot depend wholly on biological forces, as Freud proposed. If it did, we would not see such major differences from one culture to another.

Thus, Horney, like Alfred Adler, placed a greater emphasis than Freud did on social relationships as significant factors in personality formation. She argued that sex is not the governing factor in personality, as Freud had claimed, and she questioned his concepts of the Oedipus complex, the libido, and the three-part structure of personality. To Horney, people are motivated not by sexual or aggressive forces but by the needs for security and love. We shall see that this view reflected her personal experience.

**The Life of Horney (1885–1952)**

**A Search for Love**

Karen Danielsen was born in a village near Hamburg, Germany. She was the second-born child, and from an early age she envied her older brother, Berndt. He was attractive and charming, the adored first-born, but she was smarter and more vivacious. She confided to her diary, “It was always my pride that in school I was better than Berndt, that there were more amusing stories about me than about him” (Horney, 1980, p. 252). She also envied him because he was a boy, and girls were
considered inferior. “I know that as a child I wanted for a long time to be a boy, that I envied Berndt because he could stand near a tree and pee” (Horney, 1980, p. 252).

A stronger influence was her father. At the time she was born, he was a 50-year-old ship's captain of Norwegian background. Her mother was 33 and of a vastly different temperament. Whereas the father was religious, domineering, imperious, morose, and silent, the mother was attractive, spirited, and freethinking. Horney's father spent long periods away at sea, but when he was home, the opposing natures of the parents led to frequent arguments. Karen’s mother made no secret of her wish to see her husband dead. She told Karen that she had married not out of love but out of fear of becoming an old maid.

We can see roots of Horney’s personality theory in her childhood experiences. For most of her childhood and adolescence, she doubted that her parents wanted her. She believed they loved Berndt more than they loved her. At age 16, Horney wrote in her diary, “Why is everything beautiful on earth given to me, only not the highest thing, not love! I have a heart so needing love” (Horney, 1980, p. 30). Although Horney desperately wanted her father’s love and attention, he intimidated her. She recalled his frightening eyes and stern, demanding manner, and she felt belittled and rejected because he made disparaging comments about her appearance and intelligence.

As a way of retaining her mother’s affection, she acted the part of the adoring daughter, and until the age of 8 was a model child, clinging and compliant. Despite her efforts, she did not believe she was getting sufficient love and security. Her self-sacrifice and good behavior were not working, so she changed tactics and became ambitious and rebellious. Horney decided that if she could not have love and security, she would take revenge for her feelings of unattractiveness and inadequacy. “If I couldn’t be beautiful, I decided I would be smart” (Horney quoted in Rubins, 1978, p. 14).

As an adult she came to realize how much hostility she had developed as a child. Her personality theory describes how a lack of love in childhood fosters anxiety and hostility, thus providing another example of a theory developed initially in personal and intuitive terms. A biographer concluded, “In all her psychoanalytic writings—Karen Horney was struggling to make sense of herself and to obtain relief from her own difficulties” (Paris, 1994, p. xxii).

At 14, she developed an adolescent crush on a male teacher and filled her diary with paragraphs about him. She continued to have such infatuations, confused and unhappy as many adolescents are. At 17, she awakened to the reality of sex, and the following year, she met a man she described as her first real love, but the relationship lasted only 2 days. Another man came into her life, prompting 76 pages of soul-searching in her diary. Horney decided that being in love eliminated, at least temporarily, her anxiety and insecurity; it offered an escape (Sayers, 1991).

Although Horney’s quest for love and security was often thwarted, her search for a career was straightforward and successful. She decided at the age of 12, after being treated kindly by a physician, that she would become a doctor. Despite the medical establishment’s discrimination against women and her father’s strong opposition, she worked hard in high school to prepare herself for medical studies. In
1906, she entered the University of Freiburg medical school, only 6 years after the first woman had, reluctantly, been admitted.

**Marriage and Career**

During her time at medical school, Horney met two men; she fell in love with one and married the other. Oskar Horney was studying for a Ph.D. in political science and after their marriage became a successful businessman. Karen Horney excelled in her medical studies and received her degree from the University of Berlin in 1913.

The early years of marriage were a time of personal distress. She gave birth to three daughters but felt overwhelming unhappiness and oppression. She complained of crying spells, stomach pains, chronic fatigue, compulsive behaviors, frigidity, and a longing for sleep, even death. The marriage ended in 1927, after 17 years.

During and after her marriage, Horney had a number of love affairs. A biographer wrote:

> When she did not have a lover, or a relationship was breaking down, she felt lost, lonely, desperate, and sometimes suicidal. When she was involved in a morbidly dependent relationship, she hated herself for her inability to break free. She attributed her desperate need for a man . . . to her unhappy childhood. (Paris, 1994, p. 140)

When she realized that these attachments were not helping to alleviate her depression and other emotional problems, she decided to undergo psychoanalysis.

**Psychoanalysis and Compensation**

The therapist Horney consulted, Karl Abraham (a loyal follower of Freud), attributed her problems to her attraction to forceful men, which he explained was a residue of her childhood Oedipal longings for her powerful father. “Her readiness to abandon herself to such patriarchal figures, said Abraham, was betrayed by her leaving her handbag [in Freud’s view, a symbolic representation of the female genitals] in his office on her very first visit” (Sayers, 1991, p. 88). The analysis was not a success. She decided that Freudian psychoanalysis was of only minimal help to her, and she turned instead to self-analysis, a practice she continued throughout her life.

During her self-analysis, Horney was strongly influenced by Adler’s notion of compensation for feelings of inferiority. She was particularly sensitive to Adler’s remark that physical unattractiveness was a cause of inferiority feelings. She concluded that she “needed to feel superior because of her lack of beauty and sense of inferiority as a woman, which led her to masculine protest” by excelling in a male-dominated domain, such as medicine was at the time (Paris, 1994, p. 63). Apparently she believed that by studying medicine, and by promiscuous sexual behavior, she was acting more like a man.

Horney’s search for love and security continued when she immigrated to the United States. During this period, her most intense love affair was with the analyst Erich Fromm. When it ended after 20 years, she was deeply hurt. Although Fromm was 15 years younger, she may have seen him as a father figure. One event that led to
the breakdown of the relationship was that Horney persuaded Fromm to analyze her
daughter Marianne. Fromm helped the woman understand her hostility toward
her mother, giving Marianne the confidence to confront Horney for the first time
in her life (McLaughlin, 1998).1

Horney’s relentless search for love continued, and she chose younger and
younger men, many of whom were analysts whose training she was supervising. Yet
her attitude toward them could be detached. She told a friend about one young man,
saying that she didn’t know whether to marry him or get a cocker spaniel. She chose
the dog (Paris, 1994).

From 1932 to 1952, Horney served on the faculty of psychoanalytic institutes in
Chicago and New York. She was a founder of the Association for the Advancement
of Psychoanalysis and the American Institute for Psychoanalysis. In 1941, she began
the American Journal of Psychoanalysis. For many years she was a popular lecturer,
writer, and therapist.

LOG ON

Personality Theories: Karen Horney
Provides an overview of Horney’s life and work.

For a direct link to this site, log on to the student companion site for this book at
http://www.academic.cengage.com/psychology/Schultz and choose Chapter 4.

The Childhood Need for Safety

Horney agreed with Freud, in principle, about the importance of the early years of
childhood in shaping the adult personality. However, they differed on the specifics
of how personality is formed. Horney believed that social forces in childhood, not
biological forces, influence personality development. There are neither universal de-
velopmental stages nor inevitable childhood conflicts. Instead, the social relationship
between the child and his or her parents is the key factor.

Horney thought childhood was dominated by the safety need, by which she
meant the need for security and freedom from fear (Horney, 1937). Whether the
infant experiences a feeling of security and an absence of fear is decisive in de-
termining the normality of his or her personality development. A child’s security
depends entirely on how the parents treat the child. The major way parents weaken
or prevent security is by displaying a lack of warmth and affection for the child. This
was Horney’s situation in childhood. Her parents had provided little warmth and af-
fection; she behaved the same way with her three daughters. She believed children
could withstand, without appreciable ill effect, much that is usually considered

safety need
A higher-level need for
security and freedom
from fear.

1 In 2006, in a commemoration of the 120th anniversary of Horney’s birth, Marianne described her mother
as a private person who “never was a good team player, never a family person” (Eckardt, 2006, p. 3).
traumatic—such as abrupt weaning, occasional beatings, or even premature sexual experiences—as long as they feel wanted and loved and are, therefore, secure.

Parents can act in various ways to undermine their child’s security and thereby induce hostility. These parental behaviors include obvious preference for a sibling, unfair punishment, erratic behavior, promises not kept, ridicule, humiliation, and isolation of the child from peers. Horney suggested that children know whether their parents’ love is genuine. False demonstrations and insincere expressions of affection do not easily fool children. The child may feel the need to repress the hostility engendered by the parents’ undermining behaviors for reasons of helplessness, fear of the parents, need for genuine love, or guilt feelings.

Horney placed great emphasis on the infant’s helplessness. Unlike Adler, however, she did not believe all infants necessarily feel helpless, but when these feelings do arise, they can lead to neurotic behavior. Children’s sense of helplessness depends on their parents’ behavior. If children are kept in an excessively dependent state, then their feelings of helplessness will be encouraged. The more helpless children feel, the less they dare to oppose or rebel against the parents. This means that the child will repress the resulting hostility, saying, in effect, “I have to repress my hostility because I need you.”

Children can easily be made to feel fearful of their parents through punishment, physical abuse, or more subtle forms of intimidation. The more frightened children become, the more they will repress their hostility. In this instance, the child is saying, “I must repress my hostility because I am afraid of you.”
Paradoxically, love can be another reason for repressing hostility toward parents. In this case, parents tell their children how much they love them and how greatly they are sacrificing for them, but the parents’ warmth and affection are not honest. Children recognize that these verbalizations and behaviors are poor substitutes for genuine love and security, but they are all that is available. The child must repress his or her hostility for fear of losing even these unsatisfactory expressions of love.

Guilt is yet another reason why children repress hostility. They are often made to feel guilty about any hostility or rebelliousness. They may be made to feel unworthy, wicked, or sinful for expressing or even harboring resentments toward their parents. The more guilt the child feels, the more deeply repressed will be the hostility.

This repressed hostility, resulting from a variety of parental behaviors, undermines the childhood need for safety, and is manifested in the condition Horney called basic anxiety.

**Basic Anxiety: The Foundation of Neurosis**

Horney defined basic anxiety as an “insidiously increasing, all-pervading feeling of being lonely and helpless in a hostile world” (Horney, 1937, p. 89). It is the foundation on which later neuroses develop, and it is inseparably tied to feelings of hostility. Regardless of how we express basic anxiety, the feeling is similar for all of us. In Horney’s words, we feel “small, insignificant, helpless, deserted, endangered, in a world that is out to abuse, cheat, attack, humiliate, betray” (1937, p. 92). In childhood we try to protect ourselves against basic anxiety in four ways:

- Securing affection and love
- Being submissive
- Attaining power
- Withdrawing

By securing affection and love from other people, the person is saying, in effect, “If you love me, you will not hurt me.” There are several ways by which we may gain affection, such as trying to do whatever the other person wants, trying to bribe others, or threatening others into providing the desired affection.

Being submissive as a means of self-protection involves complying with the wishes either of one particular person or of everyone in our social environment. Submissive persons avoid doing anything that might antagonize others. They dare not criticize or give offense. They must repress their personal desires and cannot defend against abuse for fear that such defensiveness will antagonize the abuser. Most people who act submissive believe they are unselfish and self-sacrificing. Such persons seem to be saying, “If I give in, I will not be hurt.” This describes Horney’s childhood behavior until the age of 8 or 9.

By attaining power over others, a person can compensate for helplessness and achieve security through success or through a sense of superiority. Such persons seem to believe that if they have power, no one will harm them. This could describe Horney’s childhood once she decided to strive for academic success.

These three self-protective devices have something in common; by engaging in any of them the person is attempting to cope with basic anxiety by interacting with other people. The fourth way of protecting oneself against basic anxiety involves withdrawing...
from other people, not physically but psychologically. Such a person attempts to become independent of others, not relying on anyone else for the satisfaction of internal or external needs. For example, if someone amasses a houseful of material possessions, then he or she can rely on them to satisfy external needs. Unfortunately, that person may be too burdened by basic anxiety to enjoy the possessions. He or she must guard the possessions carefully because they are the person’s only protection against anxiety.

The withdrawn person achieves independence with regard to internal or psychological needs by becoming aloof from others, no longer seeking them out to satisfy emotional needs. The process involves a blunting, or minimizing, of emotional needs. By renouncing these needs the withdrawn person guards against being hurt by other people.

The four self-protective mechanisms Horney proposed have a single goal: to defend against basic anxiety. They motivate the person to seek security and reassurance rather than happiness or pleasure. They are a defense against pain, not a pursuit of well-being.

Another characteristic of these self-protective mechanisms is their power and intensity. Horney believed they could be more compelling than sexual or other physiological needs. These mechanisms may reduce anxiety, but the cost to the individual is usually an impoverished personality.

Often, the neurotic will pursue the search for safety and security by using more than one of these mechanisms and the incompatibility among the four mechanisms can lay the groundwork for additional problems. For example, a person may be driven by the needs to attain power and gain affection. A person may want to submit to others while also desiring power over them. Such incompatibilities cannot be resolved and can lead to more severe conflicts.

**Neurotic Needs and Trends**

Horney believed that any of these self-protective mechanisms could become so permanent a part of the personality that it assumes the characteristics of a drive or need in determining the individual’s behavior. She listed 10 such needs, which she termed **neurotic needs** because they are irrational solutions to one’s problems. The 10 neurotic needs are as follows:

1. Affection and approval
2. A dominant partner
3. Power
4. Exploitation
5. Prestige
6. Admiration
7. Achievement or ambition
8. Self-sufficiency
9. Perfection
10. Narrow limits to life

The neurotic needs encompass the four ways of protecting ourselves against anxiety. Gaining affection is expressed in the neurotic need for affection and approval. Being submissive includes the neurotic need for a dominant partner. Attaining power relates to the
Table 4.1 Horney’s neurotic needs and neurotic trends

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<th>Needs</th>
<th>Trends</th>
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<td>Affection and approval</td>
<td>Movement toward other people (the compliant personality)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A dominant partner</td>
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<td>Power</td>
<td>Movement against other people (the aggressive personality)</td>
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<td>Exploitation</td>
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<td>Prestige</td>
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<td>Admiration</td>
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<td>Self-sufficiency</td>
<td>Movement away from other people (the detached personality)</td>
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<td>Perfection</td>
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<td>Narrow limits to life</td>
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Horney noted that we all manifest these needs to some degree. For example, at one time or another, everyone seeks affection or pursues achievement. None of the needs is abnormal or neurotic in an everyday, transient sense. What makes them neurotic is the person’s intensive and compulsive pursuit of their satisfaction as the only way to resolve basic anxiety. Satisfying these needs will not help us feel safe and secure but will aid only in our desire to escape the discomfort caused by our anxiety. Also, when we pursue gratification of these needs solely to cope with anxiety, we tend to focus on only one need and compulsively seek its satisfaction in all situations.

In her later writings, she reformulated the list of needs (Horney, 1945). From her work with patients, she concluded that the needs could be presented in three groups, each indicating a person’s attitudes toward the self and others. She called these three categories of directional movement the neurotic trends (see Table 4.1).

Because the neurotic trends evolve from and elaborate on the self-protective mechanisms, we can see similarities with our earlier descriptions. The neurotic trends involve compulsive attitudes and behaviors; that is, neurotic persons are compelled to behave in accordance with at least one of the neurotic trends. They are also displayed indiscriminately, in any and all situations.

The neurotic trends are:

- Movement toward other people (the compliant personality),
- Movement against other people (the aggressive personality), and
- Movement away from other people (the detached personality).

The Compliant Personality

The compliant personality displays attitudes and behaviors that reflect a desire to move toward other people; an intense and continuous need for affection and approval, an urge to be loved, wanted, and protected. Compliant personalities display these needs toward everyone, although they usually have a need for one dominant
person, such as a friend or spouse, who will take charge of their lives and offer protection and guidance.

Compliant personalities manipulate other people, particularly their partners, to achieve their goals. They often behave in ways others find attractive or endearing. For example, they may seem unusually considerate, appreciative, responsive, understanding, and sensitive to the needs of others. Compliant people are concerned with living up to others’ ideals and expectations, and they act in ways others perceive as unselfish and generous.

In dealing with other people, compliant personalities are conciliatory and subordinate their personal desires to those of other people. They are willing to assume blame and to defer to others, never being assertive, critical, or demanding. They do whatever the situation requires, as they interpret it, to gain affection, approval, and love. Their attitude toward themselves is consistently one of helplessness and weakness. Horney suggested that compliant people are saying, “Look at me. I am so weak and helpless that you must protect and love me.”

Consequently, they regard other people as superior, and even in situations in which they are notably competent, they see themselves as inferior. Because the security of compliant personalities depends on the attitudes and behavior of other people toward them, they become excessively dependent, needing constant approval and reassurance. Any sign of rejection, whether actual or imagined, is terrifying to them, leading to increased efforts to regain the affection of the person they believe has rejected them.

The source of these behaviors is the person’s repressed hostility. Horney found that compliant persons have repressed profound feelings of defiance and vindictiveness. They have a desire to control, exploit, and manipulate others—the opposite of what their behaviors and attitudes express. Because their hostile impulses must be repressed, compliant personalities become subservient, always trying to please and asking nothing for themselves.

The Aggressive Personality

Aggressive personalities move against other people. In their world, everyone is hostile; only the fittest and most cunning survive. Life is a jungle in which supremacy, strength, and ferocity are the paramount virtues. Although their motivation is the same as that of the compliant type, to alleviate basic anxiety, aggressive personalities never display fear of rejection. They act tough and domineering and have no regard for others. To achieve the control and superiority so vital to their lives, they must consistently perform at a high level. By excelling and receiving recognition, they find satisfaction in having their superiority affirmed by others.

Because aggressive personalities are driven to surpass others, they judge everyone in terms of the benefit they will receive from the relationship. They make no effort to appease others but will argue, criticize, demand, and do whatever is necessary to achieve and retain superiority and power.

They drive themselves hard to become the best; therefore, they may actually be highly successful in their careers, although the work itself will not provide intrinsic satisfaction. Like everything else in life, work is a means to an end, not an end in itself.
Aggressive personalities may appear confident of their abilities and uninhibited in asserting and defending themselves. However, like compliant personalities, aggressive personalities are driven by insecurity, anxiety, and hostility.

**The Detached Personality**

People described as detached personalities are driven to move away from other people and to maintain an emotional distance. They must not love, hate, or cooperate with others or become involved in any way. To achieve this total detachment, they strive to become self-sufficient. If they are to function as detached personalities, they must rely on their own resources, which must be well developed.

Detached personalities have an almost desperate desire for privacy. They need to spend as much time as possible alone, and it disturbs them to share even such an experience as listening to music. Their need for independence makes them sensitive to any attempt to influence, coerce, or obligate them. Detached personalities must avoid all constraints, including timetables and schedules, long-term commitments such as marriages or mortgages, and sometimes even the pressure of a belt or necktie.

They need to feel superior, but not in the same way aggressive personalities do. Because detached people cannot actively compete with other people for superiority—that would mean becoming involved with others—they believe their greatness should be recognized automatically, without struggle or effort on their part. One manifestation of this sense of superiority is the feeling that one is unique, that one is different and apart from everyone else.

Detached personalities suppress or deny all feelings toward other people, particularly feelings of love and hate. Intimacy would lead to conflict, and that must be avoided. Because of this constriction of their emotions, detached personalities place great stress on reason, logic, and intelligence.

You have probably noticed the similarity between the three personality types proposed by Horney and the styles of life in Adler’s personality theory. Horney’s compliant personality is similar to Adler’s getting type, the aggressive personality is like the dominant or ruling type, and the detached personality is similar to the avoiding type. This is yet another example of how Adler’s ideas influenced later explanations of personality.

Horney found that in the neurotic person, one of these three trends is dominant, and the other two are present to a lesser degree. For example, the person who is predominantly aggressive also has some need for compliance and detachment. The dominant neurotic trend is the one that determines the person’s behaviors and attitudes toward others. This is the mode of acting and thinking that best serves to control basic anxiety and any deviation from it is threatening to the person. For this reason, the other two trends must actively be repressed, which can lead to additional problems. Any indication that a repressed trend is pushing for expression causes conflict within the individual.

In Horney’s system, conflict is defined as the basic incompatibility of the three neurotic trends; this conflict is the core of neurosis. All of us, whether neurotic or normal, suffer some conflict among these basically irreconcilable modes. The difference between the normal person and the neurotic person lies in the intensity of
the conflict; it is much more intense in the neurotic. Neurotic people must battle to keep the non-dominant trends from being expressed. They are rigid and inflexible, meeting all situations with the behaviors and attitudes that characterize the dominant trend, regardless of their suitability.

In the person who is not neurotic, all three trends can be expressed as circumstances warrant. A person may sometimes be aggressive, sometimes compliant, and sometimes detached. The trends are not mutually exclusive and can be integrated harmoniously within the personality. The normal person is flexible in behaviors and attitudes and can adapt to changing situations.

**The Idealized Self-Image**

Horney argued that all of us, normal or neurotic, construct a picture of ourselves that may or may not be based on reality. Horney’s own search for self was difficult. At age 21, she wrote in her diary:

> There’s still such chaos in me... Just like my face: a formless mass that only takes on shape through the expression of the moment. The searching for our selves is the most agonizing. (Horney, 1980, p. 174)

In normal persons, the self-image is built on a realistic appraisal of our abilities, potentials, weaknesses, goals, and relations with other people. This image supplies a sense of unity and integration to the personality and a framework within which to approach others and ourselves. If we are to realize our full potential, a state of self-realization, our self-image must clearly reflect our true self.

Neurotic persons, who experience conflict between incompatible modes of behavior, have personalities characterized by disunity and disharmony. They construct an *idealized self-image* for the same purpose as normal persons do: to unify the personality. But their attempt is doomed to failure because their self-image is not based on a realistic appraisal of personal strengths and weaknesses. Instead, it is based on an illusion, an unattainable ideal of absolute perfection.

To attempt to realize this unattainable ideal, neurotic people engage in what Horney called the *tyranny of the shoulds*. They tell themselves they should be the best or most perfect student, spouse, parent, lover, employee, friend, or child. Because they find their real self-image so undesirable, they believe they must act to live up to their illusory, idealized self-image, in which they see themselves in a highly positive light, for example, being virtuous, honest, generous, considerate, and courageous. In doing so, they deny their real selves and try to become what they think they should be or what they need to be to match their idealized self-image. However, their efforts are doomed to failure; they can never achieve their unrealistic self-image.

Although the neurotic or idealized self-image does not coincide with reality, it is real and accurate to the person who created it. Other people can easily see through this false picture, but the neurotic cannot. The neurotic person believes that the incomplete and misleading self-picture is real. The idealized self-image is a model of what the neurotic thinks he or she is, can be, or should be.

A realistic self-image, on the other hand, is flexible and dynamic, adapting as the individual develops and changes. It reflects strengths, growth, and self-awareness.
The realistic image is a goal, something to strive for, and as such it reflects and leads the person. By contrast, the neurotic self-image is static, inflexible, and unyielding. It is not a goal but a fixed idea, not an inducement to growth but a hindrance demanding rigid adherence to its proscriptions.

The neurotic’s self-image is an unsatisfactory substitute for a reality-based sense of self-worth. The neurotic has little self-confidence because of insecurity and anxiety, and the idealized self-image does not allow for correction of those deficiencies. It provides only an illusory sense of worth and alienates the neurotic from the true self. Developed to reconcile incompatible modes of behavior, the idealized self-image becomes just one more element in that conflict. Far from resolving the problem, it adds to a growing sense of futility. The slightest crack in the neurotic’s idealized self-image threatens the false sense of superiority and security the whole edifice was constructed to provide, and little is needed to destroy it. Horney suggested that the neurotic self-image may be like a house filled with dynamite.

One way in which neurotics attempt to defend themselves against the inner conflicts caused by the discrepancy between idealized and real self-images is by externalization, projecting the conflicts onto the outside world. This process may temporarily alleviate the anxiety caused by the conflict but will do nothing to reduce the gap between the idealized self-image and reality.

Externalization involves the tendency to experience conflicts as though they were occurring outside of one. It also entails depicting external forces as the source of the conflicts. For example, neurotics who experience self-hatred because of the discrepancy between real and idealized selves may project that hatred onto other people or institutions and come to believe that the hatred is emanating from these external sources and not from themselves.

**Feminine Psychology: Mommy Track or the Career Path?**

Early in her career, Horney expressed her disagreement with Freud’s views on women. She began work on her version of feminine psychology in 1922, the year she became the first woman to present a paper on the topic at an international psychoanalytic congress. That meeting, held in Berlin, was chaired by Sigmund Freud.

Horney was especially critical of Freud’s notion of penis envy, which she believed was derived from inadequate evidence (that is, from Freud’s clinical interviews with neurotic women). Freud offered descriptions and interpretations of this alleged phenomenon from a male point of view in a place and time when women were considered second-class citizens. He suggested that women were victims of their anatomy, forever envious, and resentful of men for possessing a penis. Freud also concluded that women had poorly developed superegos (a result of inadequately resolved Oedipal conflicts), and inferior body images, because women believed they were really castrated men.

**Womb Envy**

Horney countered these ideas by arguing that men envied women because of their capacity for motherhood. Her position on this issue was based on the pleasure she had experienced in childbirth. She uncovered in her male patients what she called womb envy. “When one begins, as I did, to analyze men only after a fairly long
experience of analyzing women, one receives a most surprising impression of the intensity of this envy of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood” (Horney, 1967, pp. 60–61).

Men have such a small part to play in the act of creating new life that they must sublimate their womb envy and overcompensate for it by seeking achievement in their work. Womb envy and the resentment that accompanies it are manifested unconsciously in behaviors designed to disparage and belittle women and to reinforce their inferior status. By denying women equal rights, minimizing their opportunities to contribute to society, and downgrading their efforts to achieve, men retain their so-called natural superiority. Underlying such typical male behavior is a sense of inferiority deriving from their womb envy.

Horney did not deny that many women believe themselves to be inferior to men. What she questioned was Freud’s claim of a biological basis for these feelings. Although women may view themselves as inadequate compared to men, they do so for societal reasons, not because they were born female. If women feel unworthy, it is because they have been treated that way in male-dominated cultures. After generations of social, economic, and cultural discrimination, it is understandable that many women see themselves in this light.

The Flight from Womanhood

As a result of these feelings of inferiority, women may choose to deny their femininity and to wish, unconsciously, that they were men. Horney referred to this as the flight from womanhood, a condition that can lead to sexual inhibitions (Horney, 1926). Part of the sexual fear associated with this condition arises from childhood fantasies about the difference in size between the adult penis and the female child’s vagina. The fantasies focus on vaginal injury and the pain of forcible penetration.
This produces a conflict between the unconscious desire to have a child and the fear of intercourse. If the conflict is sufficiently strong, it can lead to emotional disturbances that manifest themselves in relations with men. These women distrust and resent men and reject their sexual advances.

**The Oedipus Complex**

Horney also disagreed with Freud about the nature of the Oedipus complex. She did not deny the existence of conflicts between children and parents, but she did not believe they had a sexual origin. By removing sex from the Oedipus complex, she reinterpreted the situation as a conflict between dependence on one’s parents and hostility toward them.

We discussed parental behaviors that undermine the satisfaction of the childhood need for safety and security and lead to the development of hostility. At the same time, the child remains dependent on the parents so that expressing hostility is unacceptable; it could further damage the child’s security. The child is saying, in effect, “I have to repress my hostility because I need you.”

As we noted, the hostile impulses remain and create basic anxiety. To Horney, “The resulting picture may look exactly like what Freud describes as the Oedipus complex: passionate clinging to one parent and jealousy toward the other” (Horney, 1939, p. 83). Thus, her explanation for Oedipal feelings lies in neurotic conflicts that evolve from parent–child interactions. These feelings are not based on sex or other biological forces, nor are they universal. They develop only when parents act to undermine their child’s security.

Freud did not respond to Horney’s challenge to his views on women, nor did he alter his concept of the Oedipus complex. In a veiled allusion to Horney’s work, he wrote, “We shall not be very greatly surprised if a woman analyst, who has not been sufficiently convinced of the intensity of her own wish for a penis, also fails to attach proper importance to that factor in her patients” (Freud, 1940). Of Horney herself, Freud remarked, “She is able but malicious” (quoted in Blanton, 1971, p. 65). Horney was bitter about Freud’s failure to recognize the legitimacy of her views.

**Motherhood or Career?**

As an early feminist, Horney adopted several positions that have a contemporary ring. In 1934, she wrote an essay describing the psychological conflicts in defining women’s roles, contrasting the traditional ideal of womanhood with a more modern view (Horney, 1967). In the traditional scheme, promoted and endorsed by most men, the woman’s role was to love, admire, and serve her man. Her identity was a reflection of her husband’s. Horney suggested that women should seek their own identity, as she did, by developing their abilities and pursuing careers.

These traditional and modern roles create conflicts that many women to this day have difficulty resolving. Drawing on Horney’s work, a later feminist wrote that modern women are caught between wanting to make themselves desirable to men and pursuing their own goals. The competing purposes elicit conflicting behaviors: seductive versus aggressive, deferential versus ambitious. Modern women are torn between love and work and are consequently dissatisfied in both. (Westkott, 1986, p. 14)
It remains as troublesome for 21st-century women to combine marriage, motherhood, and career as it was for Karen Horney in the 1930s. Her decision to develop her abilities and focus on her work brought her enormous satisfaction, but she continued throughout her life to search for security and love.

**Cultural Influences on Feminine Psychology**

Horney recognized the impact of social and cultural forces on the development of personality. She also recognized that different cultures and social groups view women’s roles in different ways. Thus, there can be many different feminine psychologies. “The American woman is different from the German woman; both are different from certain Pueblo Indian women. The New York society woman is different from the farmer’s wife in Idaho. . . . Specific cultural conditions engender specific qualities and faculties, in women as in men” (Horney, 1939, p. 119).

One example of the power of culture to shape women’s lives and expectations can be found in traditional Chinese society. As far back as the first millennium B.C., women were considered subordinate to men. Society was governed by the belief that the universe contained two contrasting yet interacting elements, *yin* and *yang*. *Yang* represents the male element and contains all that is vital, positive, strong, and active. *Yin* represents the female element and contains all that is dark, weak, and passive. Over time, these elements came to form a hierarchy in which men were considered superior and women inferior.

This idea became part of the teaching of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 B.C.), whose work was the ruling ideology of China for centuries. Strict rules of conduct were established for women; they were expected to be submissive, obedient, respectful, chaste, and unselfish. The Chinese word for woman literally meant “inside person,” denoting her status as restricted to the confines of the home.

A respectable Chinese woman was not to be seen or heard. She was expected never to be freed from male domination, as her duty was to obey her father at home, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son when widowed. . . . Men were counseled against listening to women for fear that disaster would result. The exercise of willfulness and ambition, considered heroic in a man, was considered wicked and depraved in a woman. (Loo, 1998, p. 180)

If we contrast this attitude with the widely accepted views of a woman’s place in contemporary American society, and in rapidly changing Chinese society as well, we can easily accept Horney’s position that the feminine psyche is influenced, even determined, by cultural forces.

**Questions About Human Nature**

Horney’s image of human nature is considerably more optimistic than Freud’s. One reason for her optimism was her belief that biological forces do not condemn us to conflict, anxiety, neurosis, or universality in personality. To Horney, each person is unique. Neurotic behavior, when it occurs, results from social forces in childhood. Parent–child relationships will either satisfy or frustrate the child’s need for safety.
If that need is frustrated, the outcome is neurotic behavior. Neuroses and conflicts can be avoided if children are raised with love, acceptance, and trust. Each of us has the innate potential for self-realization, and this is our ultimate and necessary goal in life. Our intrinsic abilities and potential will blossom as inevitably and naturally as an acorn grows into an oak tree. The only thing that can obstruct our development is the thwarting in childhood of our need for safety and security.

Horney also believed that we have the capacity to consciously shape and change our personality. Because human nature is flexible, it is not formed into immutable shapes in childhood. Each of us possesses the capacity to grow. Therefore, adult experiences may be as important as those of childhood.

So confident was Horney of our capacity for self-growth that she emphasized self-analysis in her therapeutic work as well as in her own life. In her book entitled *Self-Analysis* (Horney, 1942), she noted our ability to help resolve our own problems. On the issue of free will versus determinism, then, Horney argued in favor of the former. We can all shape our lives and achieve self-realization.

**Assessment in Horney’s Theory**

The methods Horney used to assess the functioning of the human personality were essentially those favored by Freud—free association and dream analysis—but with some modification. The most basic difference in technique between Horney and Freud was in the relationship between analyst and patient. Horney believed that Freud played too passive a role and was too distant and intellectual. She suggested that analysis should be an “exquisitely cooperative enterprise” between patient and therapist (Horney quoted in Cherry & Cherry, 1973, p. 84).

Although Horney kept a couch in her office, she did not use it with every patient. Adopting an attitude she called constructive friendliness, she approached the use of the couch as follows.

This is something one needs to try through trial and error, asking if the patient operates better lying on the couch or sitting upright. It is particularly helpful to encourage a patient so he feels free to sit up, lie down, walk around, or whatever he wants. (Horney, 1987, p. 43)

With free association, Horney did not follow Freud’s lead in trying to probe the unconscious mind. She believed that patients could easily distort or hide aspects of their inner lives or falsify feelings about events that they remembered. Instead, Horney focused on her patients’ visible emotional reactions toward her, believing that these could explain her patients’ attitudes toward other people. She pursued these attitudes through free association. She did not delve into presumed infantile sexual fantasies at the beginning of a course of analysis but inquired about the early years only after evaluating present attitudes, defenses, and conflicts.

Horney believed that each attitude or feeling resulted from a deeper, preexisting attitude, which in turn had resulted from a deeper one, and so on. Through free association, the analyst gradually uncovered the patient’s early experiences and emotions, similar to peeling the layers of an onion.
Horney also believed that dream analysis could reveal a person’s true self, and that dreams represented attempts to solve problems, in either a constructive or a neurotic way. Dreams can show us a set of attitudes that may differ from those of our self-image. She did not offer a list of universal dream symbols but insisted that each dream be explained within the context of the patient’s conflict. Focusing on a dream’s emotional content, she concluded that the “safest clue to the understanding of a dream is in the feelings of the patient as he has them in the dream” (Horney, 1987, p. 61).

A 35-item self-report inventory, the CAD, was devised to measure Horney’s three neurotic trends, the Compliant, Aggressive, and Detached personality types (Cohen, 1967). The Horney–Coolidge Type Indicator (HCTI), a 57-item self-report inventory, is another measure of Horney’s three neurotic trends. Research with 198 college students confirmed the HCTI as a valid measure of the compliant, aggressive, and detached personality types (Coolidge, Moor, Yamazaki, Stewart, & Segal, 2001).

Other studies using college student responses on the HCTI found that men tended to score higher on the aggressive and detached scales whereas women scored higher in compliance. The research also showed a relationship between Horney’s three neurotic types and various personality disorders. For example, aggression and detachment correlated highly with psychoticism; compliance was associated with neuroticism (Coolidge, Moor, Yamazaki, Stewart, & Segal, 2001; Shatz, 2004; for additional research support see Coolidge, Segal, Benight, & Danielian, 2004).

Research on Horney’s Theory

Horney used the case study method. Therefore, her approach, data, and interpretations are subject to the same criticisms made of the work of Freud, Jung, and Adler. The weaknesses inherent in the case study method apply to her work no less than to theirs.

Horney was opposed to taking verbatim notes of her patients’ recollections. “I don’t see how anybody can employ a wholehearted receptivity and productivity of attention at the same time that he is anxiously scribbling everything down” (Horney, 1987, p. 30). As with Freud, Jung, and Adler, then, we do not have complete records of her analytic sessions and the data she collected during them. However, she tried to be rigorous and scientific in her clinical observations, formulating hypotheses, testing them in therapeutic situations, and maintaining that her data were tested the same way scientists in other fields test theirs.

Neurotic Trends

Researchers have studied Horney’s three proposed neurotic trends, redefining them as follows: moving against people (ill-tempered), moving away from people (shy), and moving toward people (dependent) (Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1987, 1988). The behavior of people belonging to each of these types in late childhood was compared with their behavior 30 years later to discover whatever continuities might exist.

Ill-tempered children, both boys and girls, tended to become ill-tempered adults, prone to divorce and downward occupational mobility. Gender differences
were found in the shy and dependent types. Shy boys became aloof adults who experienced marital and job instability. On the other hand, shy girls manifested no such problems later in life. Dependent boys became agreeable, socially poised, warm, and giving adults with stable marriages and careers; the opposite was found for dependent girls (Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989).

A study dealing with the neurotic trends of moving against people (aggressive) and moving away from people (detached) compared measures from aggressive and detached children at ages 7 to 13 with their behavior 5 to 7 years later (Moskowitz & Schwartzman, 1989). Those high in aggressiveness were found to be low in school achievement and to have psychiatric problems. Those who were detached or withdrawn were found to have inaccurate and negative self-images. The researchers concluded that Horney’s proposed personality types had predictive value for later behavior.

Research using the CAD inventory found that college students preparing for careers in helping professions such as nursing and social work scored higher in compliance than did students considering careers in business or science. The business students, on a more competitive career path, scored higher on aggression. Science students scored highest on the detached scale. These results appear to be consistent with Horney’s descriptions of the three neurotic trends (Cohen, 1967; Rendon, 1987).

Feminine Psychology

Some research applies indirectly to Horney’s ideas on feminine psychology. In our discussion of research on the Oedipus complex, we mentioned a study on dreams that provided support for the Freudian concept of penis envy (Hall & Van de Castle, 1965); this study fails to support Horney’s questioning of the concept of penis envy. However, research that refutes Freud’s notion that women have inadequately developed superegos and inferior body images can be taken to support Horney’s views.

The Tyranny of the Shoulds

Research with 150 college students asked them to recall three things they did during the week prior to the study. They were also asked to indicate whether they did these things because they felt they should or ought to do them, or whether they really wanted to do them. Students who had done more things because they genuinely wanted to, rather than because they felt they should, scored significantly higher on general life satisfaction than those whose behavior was directed primarily by what they believed they ought to do (Berg, Janoff-Bulman, & Cotter, 2001).

Neurotic Competitiveness

Horney spoke of neurotic competitiveness as a major aspect of contemporary culture. She defined it as an indiscriminate need to win at all costs. The feeling toward life of the person manifesting this need can be “compared to that of a jockey in a race, for whom only one thing matters—whether he is ahead of the others” (Horney, 1937, p. 189).
A self-report inventory, the Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale (HCA), was developed to test experimentally the concept of neurotic competitiveness (Ryckman, Thornton, & Butler, 1994). This 26-item scale contains such items as “Winning in competition makes me feel more powerful as a person.” Research participants evaluate the items on a five-point continuum ranging from never true of me to always true of me.

Studies using the HCA and other measures of personality found that people who scored high on competitiveness were also high in narcissism, neuroticism, authoritarianism, dogmatism, and mistrust, and low in self-esteem and psychological health. Hypercompetitive men were also found to be hypermasculine or macho, believing that women were sex objects who deserved neither respect nor consideration. A comparison of college students in the United States and in the Netherlands found that the Americans scored higher in hypercompetitiveness, suggesting cultural differences in this aspect of their personality (Dru, 2003; Ryckman, Hammer, Kaczor, & Gold, 1990; Ryckman, Thornton, & Butler, 1994; Ryckman, Thornton, Gold, & Burckle, 2002). These findings support Horney’s description of the neurotic competitive personality.

**Reflections on Horney’s Theory**

Horney’s contributions, although impressive, are not as well known or recognized within psychology as those of Freud, Jung, and Adler. However, her work drew a large public following, partly because of her personal qualities. A student recalled:

There was about her an air of wholeness, of certainty, of total dedication and commitment, of a conviction that her ideas were valuable, that they were worth sharing with colleagues and students, because knowing them would make a difference to helping those in need. (Clemmens, 1987, p. 108)

These characteristics are evident in her books, which were written in a style readily understood by people who do not have professional analytical training. Her theory has a commonsense appeal and for many people it seems applicable to their own personality or to that of a relative or friend.

Horney’s ideas may be more relevant to problems inherent in American culture than the ideas of Freud, Jung, or Adler. Many personality researchers see Horney’s conception of the neurotic trends as a valuable way to categorize deviant behavior. Others accept Horney’s emphasis on self-esteem, the need for safety and security, the role of basic anxiety, and the importance of the idealized self-image. Her work had a significant impact on the personality theories developed by Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow. Maslow used her concept of the real self and self-realization; her notion of basic anxiety is similar to Erikson’s concept of basic mistrust.

Although Horney was trained in orthodox Freudian theory and paid tribute to Freud for providing the foundation and tools for her work, her theory deviated from psychoanalysis in several ways. Not surprisingly, she received a great deal of criticism from those who continued to adhere to Freud’s position. To the Freudians, Horney’s denial of the importance of biological instincts and her reduced emphasis on sexuality and the unconscious were obvious weaknesses.

Horney’s personality theory is not as completely or consistently developed as Freud’s. It has been suggested that because Freud’s model was constructed so
Chapter Summary

Karen Horney differed from Freud in her views on feminine psychology and her emphasis on social rather than biological forces as shapers of personality. Her childhood experiences helped shape her lifelong quest for love and security as well as her theory of personality.

The need for safety refers to security and freedom from fear. It depends on being loved and wanted as a child. When security is undermined, hostility is induced. The child may repress this hostility out of a sense of helplessness, fear of the parents, the need to receive parental affection, or guilt about expressing hostility. Repressing hostility leads to basic anxiety, defined as a feeling of being lonely and helpless in a hostile world.

Four ways to protect oneself against basic anxiety are by gaining affection, being submissive, attaining power, and withdrawing. Any of these protective devices may become a neurotic need or drive. Horney proposed 10 neurotic needs, which she later grouped as three neurotic trends: moving toward people (the compliant personality), moving against people (the aggressive personality), and moving away from people (the detached personality). Compliant types need affection and approval and will do what other people want. Aggressive types are hostile toward others and seek to achieve control and superiority. Detached types keep an emotional distance from others and have a deep need for privacy.

In the normal person, the idealized self-image is built on a realistic appraisal of one’s abilities and goals. It helps the person achieve self-realization—the maximum development and use of one’s potential. The idealized self-image in the neurotic person is based on an unrealistic, misleading appraisal of one’s abilities.

Horney argued against Freud’s contention that women have penis envy, poorly developed superegos, and inferior body images. She believed that men envy women
because of their capacity for motherhood and, consequently, experience womb envy, which they sublimate through achievement. She rejected the sexual basis for the Oedipus complex, suggesting that it involved a conflict between dependence on and hostility toward parents.

Horney’s image of human nature is more optimistic than is Freud’s. Each person is unique and is not doomed to conflict. Although childhood influences are important, later experiences also shape personality. The ultimate goal of life is self-realization, an innate urge to grow, which can be helped or hindered by social forces. According to Horney, we can consciously shape and change our personalities.

Horney’s methods of assessment were free association and dream analysis, and her research method was the case study. Some psychologists see value in her concepts of neurotic trends, the need for safety, the role of anxiety, and the idealized self-image. Research supports aspects of her theory, namely, the neurotic trends, feminine psychology, the tyranny of the shoulds, and neurotic competitiveness. The theory has been criticized for not being developed as fully as Freud’s, for not using research data from sociology and anthropology, and for being heavily influenced by middle-class American culture.

Review Questions

1. How did Horney’s childhood experiences influence her personality theory?

2. Describe the childhood need for safety and the kinds of parental behaviors necessary for a child’s security.

3. What is basic anxiety and how does it originate?

4. Describe the four basic types of behavior people use in childhood to try to protect themselves from basic anxiety.

5. Discuss the three neurotic trends and the behaviors associated with each.

6. How do people labeled “compliant personalities” deal with other people?

7. In what ways do aggressive personalities differ from detached personalities? Which type is more likely to be successful in their career?

8. How are the neurotic trends related to the self-protective defenses against anxiety?

9. Explain the difference between normal persons and neurotic persons in terms of the neurotic trends.

10. How does the idealized self-image of the normal, realistic person differ from the idealized self-image of the neurotic person?

11. Contrast the tyranny of the shoulds and the process of externalization.

12. Horney rejected Freud’s contention of a biological basis for female inferiority. How did she account for women’s feelings of inadequacy?

13. What was Horney’s interpretation of the Oedipus complex?

14. Discuss the impact of cultural forces on women’s roles. Give examples.

15. In what ways does Horney’s image of human nature differ from Freud’s?

16. How did Horney’s use of free association differ from Freud’s?

17. Describe the results of research conducted on neurotic trends, on neurotic competitiveness, and on the tyranny of the shoulds.

18. What criticisms have been directed against Horney’s theory of personality?

19. In your opinion, what is Horney’s major contribution to the study of personality?
Suggested Readings


Horney, K. (1937). The neurotic personality of our time. New York: Norton. Describes the development of conflict and anxiety within the personality and relates neuroses to past experiences and to social and cultural forces.


Horney, K. (1987). Final lectures. New York: Norton. Lectures Horney delivered during the last year of her life. Presents refinements of her views on psychoanalytic techniques such as free association and dream analysis.


