Karen Horney: Theorist in Psychoanalysis and Feminine Psychology

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Karen Horney is unique and unparalleled in personality theory. She has the distinction of being the only woman whose theory is detailed in personality textbooks. Horney is known as a neo-Freudian for her revision of Freudian thought; a social psychological theorist for her emphasis on cultural and social influences; a humanist for her holistic view and emphasis on self-realization; and a feminist for her development of a feminine psychology. She was a founder of the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis and founder and dean of the American Institute for Psychoanalysis, a training institute. She was a teacher who could simplify the most difficult concepts; a therapist with deep human involvement; Editor of the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis;* a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association; a regular contributor to scientific sessions; and a prolific writer. She was personally and professionally a "well-rounded balance of an abundance of striving and creative possibility."

The extraordinary quality of Karen Horney is captured in her eulogy by Paul Tillich:

> Few people were so strong in the affirmation of their being, so full of the joy of living, so able to rest in themselves and to create without cessation beyond themselves. . . . If I were asked to say what above all was her work, I would answer: she herself, her being, her power to be the well-rounded balance of an abundance of striving and creative possibility. . . . She knew the darkness of the human soul, and the darkness of the world, but believed that what giveth light to any one suffering human being will finally give light to the world. The light she gave was not a

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> cold light of passionless intellect, it was the light of passion and love. She wrote books but loved human beings. She helped them by insights into themselves which had healing power (Rubins, p. 33).*

Karen Clementine Danielsen Horney was born in a suburb of Hamburg, Germany on September 16, 1885. Her father Berndt Henrik Wackels Danielsen, was a Norwegian sea captain and a naturalized German citizen; her mother, Clotilde Marie van Ronzelen, was Dutch-German. Danielsen's first wife died, leaving him with four teenaged children. Clotilde was Danielsen's second wife and eighteen years his junior. Their temperaments diverged even more than their ages. He was stern, religious, morose, and a devout Bible-reader; she was attractive, intellectual, lively, and social. By the time Karen was born, these differences had begun to erupt into marital discord. Although Danielsen was away at sea for long periods of time, his emotional presence and the anxiety it created remained. In later years, Karen's childhood experiences would contribute to the basic tenets of the personality theory she would develop.

Karen was the second born child preceded by her brother, Berndt. He was an attractive, joyful child who quickly captured his parents' hearts and was to remain their favorite. As a child Karen was compliant and admiring in her relationship with her mother and although the mother preferred Karen's brother, their relationship was a pleasant one.

Karen physically resembled her father, accompanied him on several sea voyages, greatly admired and respected him as captain and later as commodore, yet nonetheless found him intimidating and rejecting. Danielsen's derogatory comments about Karen's looks and intelligence were particularly distressing. Even as an adult she shuddered at the memory of the gaze of his blue eyes (Cherry and Cherry, 1973). Karen chose her style of life at a young age. Jack Rubins (1978) quotes Horney as saying, "If I couldn't be beautiful, I decided I would be smart." Her intellectual ability did impress her mother, who encouraged her. Her father on the other hand did not approve of education for women (Cherry and Cherry, 1973).

Education

Danielsen's attitude towards her intelligence and towards education for women in general was a source of anguish for Karen. Her

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*For a biographical review of Karen Horney and her times, see Rubins, J. L., *Karen Horney: Gentle rebel of psychoanalysis.* New York: Dial Press, 1978.

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decision to study medicine came at about the age of 12, reportedly because of a favorable impression made by a "nice country doctor" (Rubins, 1978). To realize her goal, she needed to attend the Realgymnasium for girls (comparable to high school and two years of college). Danielsen refused the permission and tuition necessary. Through the intercession of her mother, teachers, brother, and an aunt, but perhaps most importantly, Karen's promise that, if her father would grant this request, "she would ask nothing more of him," Danielsen relented (Rubins, 1978, p. 21).

During Karen's years at the Realgymnasium, her mother left her father, although they were never divorced. When Karen graduated in 1906 and entered medical school at the University of Freiburg, her mother accompanied her. Women were just newly admitted to medical schools at the time. Although their presence was officially sanctioned, there remained strong reservations on the part of some of the professors concerning the place of women. Karen was the only woman among six men who passed the preclinical examination in her class in 1908.

Marriage, Children, and Medicine

Karen seemed to excel in Freiburg not only academically but also socially; she had many friends. This pattern of integrating her professional and social life would continue. It was here in 1906 that she met Oskar Horney. He was described as extraordinarily handsome, resembling a "Prussian lieutenant" in his posture. He was majoring in economics at the University of Brunswick and preparing for a career in law. He possessed a brilliant mind, a love of physical sports, and a dominating personality (Rubins, 1978). For the next year and a half, Oskar and Karen were in continuous correspondence while he completed his work at Brunswick. In 1908 both went to the University of Gottingen to continue their studies.

On October 31, 1909, at 24 years of age Karen married Oskar Horney. Kelman (1971) quotes Horney as saying, "in the midst of my medical studies, I married." Thereafter she combined her marital life with her medical one. Her mother had died in 1911 shortly before the birth of Karen's first child, Brigitte; Karen's father had died some years earlier. While Brigitte was still a newborn, Karen took her state medical examination. She took the exams while returning home every several hours to nurse her infant daughter.

Karen graduated from the University of Berlin in 1911 after having studied at the Universities of Freiburg, Gottingen, and Berlin as was the custom at the time. She earned her medical degree at the

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University of Berlin in 1915 after completing her dissertation, "A Casuistic [Clinical] Contribution to the Question of Traumatic Psychoses" (Kelman, 1971, pp. 2-3).

In 1913, Horney gave birth to her second daughter, Marianne. Her third daughter, Renate, was born in 1915, the same year she was awarded her medical degree. The strain and conflict she experienced in balancing her roles of wife, mother, and doctor were manifested in constant fatigue. Oskar Horney, a successful business lawyer, was not supportive of a dual career for Karen and would have preferred her to devote herself exclusively to the family. Many years later Horney would write of the social role of women in a patriarchal society:

> Woman's efforts to achieve independence and enlargement of her field of activities are continually met with a skepticism which insists that such efforts should be made only in the face of economic necessity, and that they run counter to her inherent character and natural tendencies. Accordingly, all efforts of this sort are said to be without any vital significance for women, whose every thought should center upon the male or motherhood (1934, p. 605).

Early Career

During Horney's early career years, she gained professional experience by working at the Berlin-Lankwitz Sanitarium, a psychiatric clinic, for three years (1911-14); with Dr. Herman Oppenheimer at his neurological institute for one year; and with Dr. Karl Bonhoeffer on her dissertation. During World War I (1914-18) she worked in a military neuropsychiatric hospital.

Although it is not clear why Horney chose psychiatry as her specialty (Kelman, 1971), it is known that in 1911 she became a member of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Society headed by Karl Abraham. She entered and remained in therapy with Abraham for two years. Abraham considered her one of "his most gifted analysands" and praised her to Freud (Rubins, 1978). Horney, however, found Freud's basic mechanistic concepts at odds with her own observations and in her first formal psychoanalytic paper in 1917 spoke of the potential for life long growth, a view diametrically opposed to Freud's. In 1919 Horney began her private practice as a "Specialist in Psychoanalysis" and by 1920 was responsible for curriculum and training at the Psychoanalytic Institute of the Berlin Society headed by Max Eitingon. She had been an instructor at the Institute since 1918.

In the years that followed, Horney attended numerous international conferences at which she presented her developing theories in

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papers and exchanged ideas with her colleagues. At the International Congress held in Berlin in 1922, Horney presented a paper entitled, "The Genesis of the Castration Complex in Women," challenging some of Freud's concepts. Ironically, Freud himself chaired the session. As Horney was to grow bolder and more dissonant in her disagreement with Freud, he would refute or denigrate her work, for example, in "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" (1925), "Female Sexuality" (1931), and *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1949).

As much as Horney enjoyed her professional life, she especially enjoyed the time she spent vacationing with her children. Often they would go to a North Sea resort where they would hike or pick berries. Oskar Horney usually did not join them on vacation but remained at home (Cherry and Cherry, 1973).

Feminine Psychology

Horney's interest focused more and more on feminine psychology. She lectured to professional and nonprofessional organizations on issues relating to women and taught such courses as "Psychoanalysis and Gynecology." She developed a reputation for being "too outspoken" (Rubins, 1978). Although she did not regard herself as such, she was regarded by her audiences "as a living symbol of the new emancipated female" (Cherry and Cherry, 1973). In 1926 she compared the shortcomings of psychoanalysis with that of "our entire masculine civilization" in her paper on "The Flight from Womanhood." She accused psychoanalysis and those who developed its tenets of being androcentric and overly concerned with men's sexual apparatus and insufficiently appreciative of women's capacity for "pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood." Horney parallels a young boy's ideas on male/female sexual organs with those held by psychoanalysts. Based on her clinical data, she would eventually assert that womb envy was at least as likely to present a problem for men as penis envy did for women. She emphasized in 1926 and in her later work the importance of cultural factors on women's "inferior position," and that what women really envy is not the penis but the superior position of men in society.

Horney would write her most significant papers on feminine psychology between 1922 and 1939. Her concern with feminine psychology stemmed from her feeling that psychology was androcentric and that as a woman it was her task to "work out a fuller understanding for specifically female trends and attitudes in life" (Kelman, 1971). She objected to the development of a psychology of women based on an analogy to the psychology of men.

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Cultural Factors and Sex Roles

It was towards this end that Horney, in "The Problem of Feminine Masochism" (1935) competently refutes previous theories about female masochism and challenges the pervasiveness of this phenomenon. She effectively demonstrates that cultural factors and approved sex roles encourage women to be dependent upon men for love, prestige, wealth, care, and protection. This dependence results in overemphasis on pleasing men, on the feminine "cult of beauty and charm," and on the overevaluation of love (1934). This emphasis is compatible with the ideology that a woman's life is given meaning through others, e.g., husband, children, and family. Horney wrote:

> Cultural factors exert a powerful influence on women; such, in fact, that it is hard to see how any woman may escape becoming masochistic to some extent, from the effects of the culture alone without any appeal to contributory factors in the anatomophysiological characteristics of women and their psychic effects. There may appear certain fixed idiologies concerning the 'nature' of women; that she is innately weak, emotional, enjoys dependence, is limited in capacity for independent work and autonomous thinking. *It is obvious that these ideologies function not only to reconcile women to their subordinate role, but also to plant the belief that it represents a fulfillment they crave, or an ideal for which it is desirable to strive* (1935) (italics added).

Horney observed that women who exhibit the specified characteristics are those preferred by men. But Horney recognized even earlier that the relationship between men and women is similar to that between children and parents and that "The Distrust Between the Sexes" (1930) was based on the expectation that each partner would fulfill all the needs of the other, an impossible feat. She further notes that truly good, lasting marriages are rare.

Horney's own marriage became no longer viable in 1926. The cause of the separation was attributed to the aftermath of Oskar Horney's long illness three years earlier. In the intervening years, he had begun to drink and gamble heavily and their interests moved in separate directions (Cherry and Cherry, 1973).

Integration of Personal and Professional Life

Analysis of Horney's life and work indicates that Horney's experiences and observations and her professional work often converged. Perhaps as a coping strategy, Horney made personal conflicts

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the focus of her theoretical work. For example, "The Problem of the Monogamous Ideal" (1928) was presented shortly after she and Oskar Horney had separated. In fact, she published six papers on marital problems between 1927 and 1932. She also focused on the problems of raising adolescents at this time. "On Special Difficulties in Handling Young Girls" (1929) was presented when her own daughters were 18, 16, and 14 years of age and "Maternal Conflicts" (1933) when her youngest daughter was 18 and attempting to adjust to a new culture.

THE SECOND PHASE

Horney's professional life can be seen as consisting of two phases: (1) her years in Germany when she reinterpreted and refined psychoanalytic concepts and began to establish a feminine psychology; and (2) her years in America when she concluded her major work in feminine psychology and developed her own theory of personality.

Horney came to America in 1932 at the invitation of Franz Alexander to become his assistant at the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis. She arrived with her youngest daughter, Renate; Marianne arrived the following year to attend the University of Chicago Medical School; Brigitte remained in Germany where she was an actress and film star (Cherry and Cherry, 1973).

Horney, at 47 years of age had the courage and fortitude to leave the recognition she had earned at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute and establish herself once again in a new country. She firmly believed in lifelong growth and development. Two years later she moved from Chicago to New York to continue teaching, writing, and training analysts. Her work at the New School and at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute provided the material for her subsequent books. She would discuss her evolving concepts with both colleagues and students. The books she would write would be controversial and would challenge orthodox psychoanalysis.

Neurosis, Interpersonal Relationships, and Culture

Horney's transition across continents sharpened her awareness of the role of cultural factors and set the stage for her challenge of orthodox psychoanalysis through the development of her own theory of personality. Horney's developing personality theory would stress the cultural and interpersonal while orthodox psychoanalysis stressed

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the biological and intrapsychic. Horney observed that as a consequence of childhood anxiety and conflicting messages in our culture, an individual's self-image is easily distorted. A distorted self-image contributes to the development of neurosis and disturbed interpersonal relationships.

In *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939) Horney desexualized the Oedipal complex and interpreted the process as symptomatic of disturbed interpersonal relationships. The "passionate clinging to one parent and jealously toward the other" (p. 83) is the result of basic anxiety produced by a disturbed parent-child relationship, Horney theorized, and not the Oedipal complex as orthodox psychoanalysts believe. In *Our Inner Conflicts* (1945) Horney reaffirmed that "neuroses are brought about by cultural factors—which more specifically meant that neuroses were generated by disturbances in human relationships" (p. 12). In *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950) she again confirmed that neurosis is "a disturbance in one's relation to self and to others" (p. 386).

In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937) Horney defined "the character structure which recurs in nearly all neurotic persons of our time in one or another form" (p. vii). Horney found that a childhood marked by lack of warmth and security and a feeling of isolation and helplessness in a potentially hostile world can lead to neurosis in either males or females. The *underlying cause is* not different as orthodox psychoanalysts believe, but *the same:* basic anxiety produced by a disturbed parent-child relationship and the repression of basic hostility in the interest of survival and security. To combat anxiety and in an effort to gain security, the child develops various coping strategies. These strategies become permanent parts of the personality. The child may choose to (1) "move towards others" in a self-effacing solution of love and compliance; or (2) "move against others" in an expansive solution of mastery and aggression; or (3) "move away from others" in a resignation solution of freedom and detachment (Horney, 1942, 1945, 1950).

Moving well beyond Freudian concepts, Horney outlined ten neurotic needs or irrational solutions designed to reduce anxiety. Clustered around the "moving towards others" solution are the neurotic need for affection and approval, for a partner to take control of one's life, and for restriction of life to narrow borders. Central to the "moving against others" solution are the need for power, omnipotence, and perfection, for exploitation of others, for social recognition and prestige, for personal admiration, and for personal achievement. At the core of the "moving away from others" solutions

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are the need for restriction of life to narrow borders, for self-sufficiency, and for perfection and unassailability (1942, 1945, 1950).

In the first solution the child (or the neurotic is saying, "If you love me, you will note hurt me"; in the second, "If I have power, I shall not be hurt"; and in the third, "If I withdraw, nothing can hurt me" (Monte, 1977). The neurotic rigidly uses one solution almost exclusively regardless of whether or not it is adaptive. The neurotic denies or represses the other two solutions.

A normal person, on the other hand, is able to integrate the three solutions appropriately depending upon the situation. The normal person can be trusting, open and loving; self-asserting and achieving; or happily alone in occasional solitude. The differences between healthy values and the neurotic trends are that the neurotic trends are compulsive, extreme in intensity, indiscriminate in application, and unrealistic. "The difference is one between 'I wish to be, and enjoy being, loved,' and 'I must be loved at any cost'" (Horney, 1937, pp. 99-100).

Sex Role Stereotypes and Coping Strategies

Horney's emphasis on basic anxiety, the coping strategies used to reduce anxiety and what constitutes normal behavior evolved from her difficult early childhood experiences, her clinical cases, and her own needs for affection, approval, and mastery. Horney observed that in our culture the first solution, "moving towards others," is most typical of women and the second solution, "moving against others," most typical of men. The similarities between Horney's theory on coping strategies, the female/male preferences she observed, and the existing sex-role stereotypes are striking. Her observation that spontaneous integration of all three solutions marks normal behavior foreshadows the psychological concepts of androgyny and sex-role transcendence as defined by Bem (1976), Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1975), and Rebecca, Hefner, and Oleshansky (1976).

Horney theorizes that nonhealthy functioning results in alienation from the real self and the adoption of an unrealistic idealized self. In an attempt to regain security, the neurotic attempts to mold him/herself into something valued by the culture.

> He feels what he should feel, wishes what he should wish, likes what he should like. In other words, the tyranny of the should drives him frantically to be something different from what he is or could be. And in his imagination he is different—so different, indeed, that the real self fades and pales still more (Horney, 1950, p. 159).

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The "tyranny of the should" and secondary defenses such as externalization, compartmentalization, and blind spots described by Horney (1950) have been widely adopted and incorporated in numerous theories of personality to the point where they have become folk wisdom, hackneyed, yet they are concepts rarely credited to Horney. The "tyranny of the should" is particularly relevant for women who feel they "should" be "feminine" (according to society's definition) and at the same time have a strong need for achievement (O'Connell et al., 1978). This conflict can restrict spontaneous personal growth if the person focuses upon the idealized socially accepted image, i.e., the image of the "should," and not upon the real self.

Horney's (1950) insights into the forces that work toward and away from the realization of self are as relevant to psychology today as when she first wrote about them. Self-realization in fact has become the zeitgeist. The person in Horney's theory of personality is someone who has unlimited potential for growth and positive interpersonal relationships but who needs security and a strong sense of self. Maslow's ideas on self-actualization and Rogers' concept of the fully functioning person are indebted to Horney's concept of self-realization. All three recognize the importance of the real self. Maslow recognizes the importance of the attainment of basic needs such as survival and security before self-actualization can occur just as Horney and Rogers recognize that survival and security needs can warp the person's concept of self. Rogers' client-centered therapy and Perls' gestalt therapy are indebted to Horney who stressed the importance of awareness of one's feelings and emotions in addition to one's thoughts and cognitions for mental health and self-realization. (Horney briefly analyzed and then supervised Fritz Perls.) Horney (1942) believed that self-awareness is as crucial as awareness of other factors in the environment, "to search for truth about the self is as valuable as to search for truth in other areas of life." She favored introspection in the pursuit of becoming "a better, richer, and stronger human being" (1942), a pursuit she continued for her entire life.

The Final Clash with Freudian Psychoanalysis

Horney's deviation from, and reinterpretation of, Freudian concepts and her views as expressed in *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939) resulted in an uproar at the New York Psychoanalytic Society and her resignation in 1941. Horney had been removed as a training analyst because she was disturbing the students with her "deviationist" ideas. However, she recovered quickly from this setback. In the same year she became one of the founders of the Association

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for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis and of the American Institute for Psychoanalysis, a traning institute. She was Dean of the American Institute for Psychoanalysis until her death in 1952. In 1943, as a result of an administrative clash over ideological differences, Harry Stack Sullivan, Erich Fromm, and Clara Thompson left the new Institute to form the William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation in New York (Cherry and Cherry, 1973; Rubins, 1978). Despite her sadness over these departures, these were productive and rewarding years for Horney. In addition to her active involvement as a teacher who could simplify the most difficult concepts, and as a therapist with deep human involvement, Horney was Editor of the *American Journel of Psychoanalysis;* a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association; a regular contributor to scientific sessions; and a prolific writer.

Balancing Professional and Social Life

Horney traveled often and vacationed regularly to replenish herself and her creative forces. She also painted, was an excellent cook, and an avid reader on a wide range of topics. But perhaps most sustaining to her strenuous regime were the professional and cultural groups she sought and enjoyed throughout her life. These groups were particularly important during times of crisis. For example, during the repercussions of *New Ways in Psychoanalysis,* she received support from her friends in the "Zodiac Club" who shared reservations about Freudian concepts (Harry Stack Sullivan, Erich Fromm, Clara Thompson and others) and from friends with whom she met weekly to discuss "cultural issues." Among these "cultural" friends were Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and John Dollard; other friends included Paul Tillich and Erich Maria Remarque. Around 1950, Horney became interested in Zen Buddhism through her friendship with D. T. Suzuki, a Zen monk, teacher, and lecturer. After completing what would be her last book, she traveled to Japan and stayed at a series of Zen monasteries in search of further development of her concept of the real self (Kelman, 1971).

In 1952 Horney's friends and former patients suggested opening a clinic in her name. "I consider this to be the most meaningful honor I ever received or might receive during my lifetime" (Cherry and Cherry, 1973). She died on December 4, 1952 of abdominal cancer. The Karen Horney Clinic in New York was opened on May 6, 1955 and presently serves as clinic for low-cost treatment and as a research and training center as well (Cherry and Cherry, 1973).

Karen Horney is unique and unparalleled in personality theory. She has the distinction of being the only woman whose theory is

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detailed in textbooks on personality, e.g., Hall and Lindzey, 1978; Corsini, 1977; Monte, 1977. Horney is described as a neo-Freudian for her revision of Freudian thought, a social psychological theorist for her emphasis on cultural and social influences, and a humanist for her holistic view and her emphasis on self-realization. She is all of these and much, much more. The scope, depth, and breadth of her personality theory make her difficult to categorize simply but the richness of her theory makes her contributions indisputable.

Horney's contributions to theorists of diverse persuasion are legion. In memoriam of Karen Horney, Medard Boss, the world renowned existential psychologist, wrote: "From her I receive my first impulses which led me to overcome mechanistic thinking and to replace it with a holistic view which since has developed into my daseins-analytic concept" (1954, p. 48).

To say that Karen Horney is extraordinary is an understatement. She is a woman who believed in herself against what would appear to be insurmountable odds, who persisted and overcame the odds and at the same time continued to grow personally and professionally. She shared with the world her "well-rounded balance of an abundance of striving and creative possibility" and left us all a richer heritage for her "being."

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