

1945

Our Inner Conflicts

"Living with unresolved conflicts involves primarily a devastating waste of human energies, occasioned not only by the conflicts themselves but by all the devious attempts to remove them."

"Sometimes neurotic persons show a curious single-mindedness of purpose: men may sacrifice everything including their own dignity to their ambition; women may want nothing of life but love; parents may devote their entire interest to their children. Such persons give the impression of wholeheartedness. But, as we have shown, they are actually pursuing a mirage which appears to offer a solution of their conflicts. The apparent wholeheartedness is one of desperation rather than of integration."

In a nutshell

The neurotic tendencies we may have acquired in childhood are no longer necessary—if we leave them behind we can fulfill our potential.

In a similar vein

- Alfred Adler *Understanding Human Nature* (p 14)
- Anna Freud *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (p 104)
- Melanie Klein *Envy and Gratitude* (p 180)
- R. D. Laing *The Divided Self* (p 186)
- Abraham Maslow *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (p 192)
- Carl Rogers *On Becoming a Person* (p 238)

CHAPTER 28

Karen Horney

Karen Danielsen was in her mid-teens when Sigmund Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*. She would later be well-known for “feminizing” the male bastion of psychoanalysis, but it took her 35 years before she even published her first book. In between she married, had three children, and obtained a PhD.

Karen Horney (pronounced “Horn-eye”), as she became, broke away from Freud in some important ways. By refuting some of his ideas such as “penis envy” and generally downplaying the supremacy of sexual motivation, she arguably brought more sense to psychoanalysis. In addition, by showing how women were vulnerable to neuroses caused by unreal cultural expectations, she gained the deserved reputation of being the first feminist psychoanalyst.

Horney differed from Freudian dogma by saying that people did not always have to be prisoners of their unconscious minds or pasts. She wanted to find the root cause of psychological issues, but largely considered them a *present* problem that could be healed. Her delineations of neurotic types, so simple and elegant, have been a significant influence on modern therapeutic practice, and her interpersonal approach and emphasis on uncovering the “real self”—with its great potential—were important influences on the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Finally, Horney wished to make the process of analysis sufficiently understandable that people could analyze themselves. In this she presaged both cognitive therapy and the self-help movement.

Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis was conceived as a book for the layperson. While trained therapists should handle severe neuroses, Horney also believed that “with untiring effort we can go ourselves a long way towards disentangling our own conflicts.” It is therefore a self-help book, but a very fine one based on 40 years of keen observation of the mind’s defenses. You will be a remarkable person indeed if you don’t see at least part of yourself in Horney’s descriptions of the three neurotic tendencies.

Conflicts and inconsistencies

According to Horney, all neurotic symptoms (which are also called “rackets”) indicate an unresolved deeper conflict. Though the symptoms cause difficulties for the person in real life, it is the conflict that actually produces depression, anxiety, inertia, indecision, undue detachment, overdependence, and so on. A conflict involves inconsistencies to which the person is generally blind. For example:

- ❖ Someone who is greatly affronted by a perceived slur, when in fact none was given.
- ❖ One who apparently values another's friendship, but nevertheless steals from them.
- ❖ A woman who claims devotion to her children, yet somehow forgets their birthdays.
- ❖ A girl whose chief desire is to marry, but avoids contact with men.
- ❖ A forgiving and tolerant person to others who is nevertheless very severe on themselves.

Thing that "don't add up" like this indicate a divided personality. In relation to the mother, Horney commented that perhaps she was "more devoted to her ideal of being a good mother than to the children themselves." Or perhaps she had an unconscious sadistic tendency to frustrate her children's enjoyment. The point is that an outward issue may often indicate a deeper conflict. Consider a marriage in which there are arguments over every little thing. Is it the subject of the arguments that is the real issue, or some underlying dynamic?

How conflicts develop

Freud believed that our inner conflicts were a matter of instinctual drives coming up against the "civilized" conscience, a situation that we could never change. But Horney felt that our inner turmoil came about through conflicting notions about what we actually wanted.

For instance, children growing up in a hostile family environment want love like everyone else, but feel forced to become aggressive in order to cope. When they become adults, these genuine needs conflict with the neurotic need to control situations and people. The person they feel neurotically driven to be, tragically, is the very personality that will never deliver them what they truly want. The behaviors they have taken on have effectively become their personality, but it is a divided personality.

Rather than being about "penis envy" or the "Oedipus complex," Horney felt that adult neuroses stemmed from more basic factors such as too little love, smothering love, lack of guidance, attention, or respect for the child, conditional love, inconsistent rules, isolation from other children, a hostile atmosphere, domination, and so on. All of these make children feel that they have to make up for their insecurity in some way, developing strategies or "neurotic trends" that they carry into adulthood. Taken to extremes, neuroticism ends up creating "Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" characters, divided within themselves yet tragically unaware of the division.

Horney identified three basic neurotic trends: moving toward people; moving against people; and moving away from people.

Moving toward people

This type of person experienced feelings of isolation or fear in childhood, and as a result attempted to win the affection of others in the family in order to feel safe. After several years of temper tantrums, they commonly became "nice" and docile—they found a strategy better suited to getting what they wanted.

As adults, their need for affection and approval manifests itself as a deep need for a friend, lover, husband, or wife who will "fulfill all expectations of life." The compulsive need to "secure" their chosen partner occurs irrespective of what that person feels about them. Other people seem "like strange and threatening animals" who must be won over. Through being submissive, caring, sensitive, and dependent (the other person may feel they are being "killed by kindness"), this type finds an effective way to create connections and therefore feel safe. The nature of the significant other does not actually interest them that much—deep down, they may not even like other people—the main thing is to be accepted, loved, guided by, and taken care of. Ultimately, though, the need for belonging leads to misjudgments about other people.

This type's taboo against being assertive or critical creates a "poor little me" feeling that progressively weakens them. Ironically, when they occasionally go out on a limb to be aggressive or detached, often they seem suddenly more likable. After all, their aggressive tendencies have not gone away, they have just been suppressed.

Moving against people

In childhood, such people had a hostile family environment, and chose to fight it through rebellion. They began to distrust the intentions and motivations of those around them.

Adults of this type assume the world to be basically hostile, but may have acquired "a veneer of suave politeness, fair-mindedness and good fellowship." They are benevolent as long as others submit to their command. As fearful and anxious as the compliant type, instead of choosing "belonging" as their defense against a feeling of helplessness, they choose the path of "every man for himself." They dislike weakness, particularly in themselves, and they are generally strivers for success, prestige, or recognition.

"Trust no one and never let down your guard" might be their motto. Such extreme self-interest may involve exploitation or control over others.

Moving away from people

Instead of wanting to belong or to fight, in childhood this type felt too close to those around them and tried to create distance between themselves and their family, retreating into a secret world of toys or books or wishes for the future.

As adults, they have a neurotic need for detachment from the world that is quite distinct from a genuine wish for solitude, or a wish not to get