

## **Brief Account of Karen Horney**

By Bernard J. Paris

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Born Karen Danielsen in a suburb of Hamburg, Horney studied medicine at the Universities of Freiburg, Göttingen, and Berlin. She married Oskar Horney in 1909, entered analysis with Karl Abraham in 1910, and became a founding member of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute in 1920. Having separated from her husband in 1926, she emigrated to the United States in 1932, when Franz Alexander invited her to become associate director of the newly formed Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute. She moved to New York in 1934 and became a member of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. In 1941, she organized the American Institute for Psychoanalysis and was dean until her death in 1952. She was founding editor of *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*.

Karen Horney's thought went through three phases: in the 1920s and early 1930s, she wrote a series of essays in which she tried to modify orthodox ideas about feminine psychology while staying within the framework of Freudian theory. In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (New York, 1937) and *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1939), she tried to redefine psychoanalysis by replacing Freud's biological orientation with an emphasis on culture and interpersonal relationships. In *Our Inner Conflicts* (New York, 1945) and *Neurosis and Human Growth* (New York, 1950), she developed her mature theory in which individuals cope with the anxiety produced by feeling unsafe, unloved, and unvalued by disowning their spontaneous feelings and developing elaborate strategies of defense.

## **Feminine Psychology**

During her lifetime, Horney and her work were well known, but after her death, her influence gradually declined. A revival of interest began with the publication of *Feminine Psychology* (New York, 1967), a collection of her essays from the 1920s and 30s, many of which were originally written in German. Disagreeing with Freud about penis envy, female masochism, and feminine development, these essays were controversial when they first appeared but then were largely ignored until they were collected in 1967. They have been widely read since, and there has been a growing recognition that Karen Horney was the first great psychoanalytic feminist.

In her essays on feminine psychology, Horney strove to show that females have intrinsic biological constitutions and patterns of development that are to be understood in their own terms and not just as products of their difference from males. She argued that psychoanalysis regards women as defective men because it is the product of a male genius (Freud) and a male-dominated culture. The male view of the female has been incorporated into psychoanalysis as a scientific picture of woman's essential

nature. Horney developed the concept of "womb-envy," contending that male envy of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood, and of the breasts and suckling, gives rise to an unconscious tendency to devalue women. Men's impulse toward creative work is an overcompensation, she argued, for their small role in procreation.

## **Second Phase of Horney's thought**

In the second phase of Horney's thought, culture and disturbed human relationships replaced biology as the most important causes of neurotic development. As the author of *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* and *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, Horney is often thought of as a neo-Freudian member of "the cultural school," a group that also includes Erich Fromm, Harry Stack Sullivan, Clara Thompson, and Abraham Kardiner. The systematic critique of Freud in *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* aroused so much resentment at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute that Horney was forced to resign.

Horney's first two books proposed a model for the structure of neurosis in which adverse conditions in the environment as a whole, and especially in the family, create a "basic anxiety" against which the child defends itself by developing strategies of defense that are self-alienating, self-defeating, and in conflict with each other. In a striking departure from Freud, Horney advocated starting with the current constellation of defenses and inner conflicts rather than with early experience. Our problems are the result of past experiences to be sure, but these produce a character structure with an inner logic of its own that can be understood without reference to infantile origins. Horney's focus on the present rather than the past has led some analysts to complain that her explanations lack depth, while others feel that it is the source of her originality and power.

In her next book, *Self-Analysis* (New York, 1942), Horney presented her fullest account of how the psychoanalytic process works in terms of her structural paradigm. The object of therapy for Horney is to help people relinquish their defenses--which alienate them from their true likes and dislikes, hopes, fears, and desires--so that they can get in touch with what she called the "real self." *Self-Analysis* contains Horney's only extended case history, that of a patient named Clare, which is highly autobiographical. The account of Clare's problems with Peter, her lover, reflect the breakdown of Horney's relationship with Erich Fromm. There are chapters on the therapeutic process in several of Horney's other books, and her essays on the topic and the lectures she delivered in the last years of her life are collected in *The Therapeutic Process* (1999).

## **Mature Theory**

In her mature theory, developed in her last two books, Horney retained the emphasis on the present and the basic conception of the structure of neurosis developed in earlier works, but she described the defenses and the relationships between them much more systematically. According to Horney, people defend themselves against feeling unsafe, unloved, and unvalued by developing both interpersonal and intrapsychic neurotic strategies. The interpersonal strategies involve moving toward, against, or away from other people and adopting a self-effacing, expansive, or resigned solution. Each of these solutions entails a constellation of personality traits, behaviors, and beliefs, and a bargain with fate in which obedience to the dictates of that solution is supposed to be rewarded. Since people tend to employ more than one of these strategies, they are beset by inner conflicts. In order to avoid being torn apart or paralyzed, they make that strategy predominant which most accords with their culture, temperament, and circumstances; but the repressed tendencies persist, generating inconsistencies and rising to the surface if the predominant solution fails.

In the self-effacing solution, individuals try to gain safety, love, and esteem through dependency,

humility, and self-sacrificing "goodness." Their bargain is that if they are helpful, submissive people who do not seek their own gain or glory, they will be well treated by fate and other people. There are three expansive solutions: the narcissistic, the perfectionistic, and the arrogant-vindictive. Narcissists are full of self-admiration, have an unquestioned belief in their own greatness, and often display unusual charm and buoyancy. Their magic bargain is that if they hold onto their exaggerated claims for themselves, life is bound to give them what they want. Perfectionists take great pride in their rectitude and strive for excellence in every detail. They have a legalistic bargain in which correctness of conduct ensures fair treatment by fate and their fellows. Arrogant-vindictive people have a need to retaliate for injuries received in childhood and to achieve mastery by manipulating others. They do not count on life to give them anything but are convinced that they can reach their ambitious goals if they remain true to their vision of the world as a jungle and do not allow themselves to be influenced by their softer feelings or the traditional morality. Resigned people worship freedom, peace, and self-sufficiency. Their bargain is that if they ask nothing of others, they will not be bothered; that if they try for nothing, they will not fail; and that if they expect little of life, they will not be disappointed.

The intrapsychic strategies of defense are linked to the interpersonal. To compensate for feelings of weakness, inadequacy, and low self-esteem, people develop an idealized image of themselves that they seek to actualize by embarking on a search for glory. The idealized image generates a pride system, which consists of neurotic pride, neurotic claims, and tyrannical shoulds. People take pride in the imaginary attributes of their idealized selves, they demand that the world treat them in accordance with their grandiose conception of themselves, and they drive themselves to live up to the dictates of their solution. The pride system tends to intensify the self-hate against which it is supposed to be a defense, since any failure to live up to one's shoulds or of the world to honor one's claims leads to feelings of worthlessness. The content of the idealized image is most strongly determined by the predominant interpersonal strategy, but since the subordinate strategies are also at work, the idealized image is full of inner divisions. As a result, people are often caught in what Horney calls a crossfire of conflicting shoulds. Since obeying the dictates of one solution means violating those of another, they are bound to hate themselves whatever they do.

Although Horney provides an analytic approach that can be found nowhere else, she deals with many of the same issues as other post-Freudians. Her "basic anxiety" is similar to Erik Erikson's "basic mistrust," and her theory illuminates many of the stages of development Erikson describes. The search for identity often involves the formation of an idealized image, and there is a crisis later in life when people realize that they cannot actualize their idealized image.

## **Influence**

Like Heinz Kohut and his fellows, Horney is interested in problems of the self; and like Harry Guntrip, W. R. D. Fairbairn, D. W. Winnicott, John Bowlby, and other members of the British Independent School, she sees neurosis as a product of disturbed object-relations, especially in childhood. She differs from self-psychologists in seeing narcissism as reactive rather than primary and from object relations theorists in her focus on present structure rather than infantile origins. Horney's "real self" bears some resemblance to Kohut's "nuclear self" and even more to Winnicott's "true self." Alice Miller's discussion of the loss of and search for the true self in childhood often sounds like Karen Horney, as does R. D. Laing's account of ontological insecurity (which is comparable to basic anxiety) and the development of a false-self system in response to it.

Horney's mature theory has helped to inspire the interpersonal school of psychoanalysis, it has provided a model for therapies that focus on the current situation, and it has influenced some of the descriptions

of personality disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* (Washington, D.C., 1994). It has made an important contribution to the study of literature, biography, gender, and culture. Because of her emphasis on self-realization as the goal of life and the source of healthy values, Horney was recognized by Abraham Maslow as one of the founders of humanistic psychology. Her theory has most in common, perhaps, with the work of Erich Fromm, Ernest Schachtel, Carl Rogers, and Maslow. Many of Horney's ideas have made their way, often unacknowledged, into the array of concepts and techniques that are currently employed in clinical practice.

### **Tershakovec's extension of Horneyan theory**

(contributed by Anthony K. Shin)

Along with the thinkers just mentioned, Ukrainian-American psychiatrist Andrew N. Tershakovec (1921-2007) significantly extended Horneyan theory by coming up with a more correct model of the brain-mind that could supersede the flawed Freudian model. Tershakovec's model in turn connects Horneyan theory to computer science. Tershakovec showed, with corroborating results from split-brain patients of the 1950s and stroke survivors, that the brain-mind processes input from the environment by two distinct modes of information processing: serial-linear processing (S[L]P) in the left hemisphere, and parallel-distributed processing in the right hemisphere.

Serial-linear processing handles operations that require keeping events in order in time and space. SLP thus handles cognizance of spatiotemporal relationships, and is crucial to optimal development of abilities such as mathematics, syntax, and logic. However, the weakness of SLP is that it is necessarily closed to input from outside its own system (Gödel's incompleteness theorems). Parallel-distributed processing provides instantaneous receptivity to and processing of input from the environment that passes our (secondarily) conscious notice in wakefulness. Whereas the left hemisphere's SLP offers its report in the form of conscious thoughts, the right hemisphere's PDP offers its report in the form of emotions and feelings. Although mentation by SLP and PDP are not as neatly divided between the brain's hemispheres as I am suggesting by this simplified explanation, together they enable us to interact with and learn about the external environment and our relationship to it.

Tershakovec's SLP and PDP bear strong similarities to Daniel Kahneman's "System 1" ("fast," PDP) and "System 2" ("slow," SLP) processing, discussed in his *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011). Yet Kahneman advises us to regard "System 1" and "System 2" as heuristic devices, and notes that neither system can be pinpointed or localized to one part of the brain, such as the right or left hemisphere. Two questions arise in this connection:(A) Why would we need to use two different kinds of information processing?(B) What is the relationship between SLP/PDP and sleeping (primary) and waking (secondary) consciousness?

In answer to (A), briefly, we need SLP to generate hypotheses about the relationship between sensory input and its possible, unknown causes in the environment, and we need PDP to compare the hypothesized relationship with sensory input that may corroborate or disconfirm it. As for (B), the contrast between closed and open systems does NOT correspond to the difference between primary and secondary consciousness. This is because both primary and secondary consciousness exhibit openness to larger, previously unconsidered contexts. At the same time, both primary and secondary consciousness can become effectively closed off to the consideration of new input on its own merits, so that incorrect or incomplete hypotheses can be discarded or modified as the need arises. If inadequate hypotheses are adhered to, because they cannot be disconfirmed or replaced by better ones, then the

overall system of understanding keeps on reinforcing itself, and the result is neurotic thought and behavior.

### **Update, May 26, 2014:**

According to a recent article that has circulated on social media which [debunks the myth of left-right brainedness](#), it turns out that I was in error to talk at length about SLP (serial-linear processing) as being seated in the left hemisphere and PDP (parallel-distributed processing) as being seated in the right hemisphere, as if they were inert facts of nature. My source, Andrew N. Tershakovec, seems to have been mostly mistaken on this point.

However, it still seems correct to say that two different types of processing are indeed required to enable awareness, although the two systems are likely to be shared pervasively and found all over both hemispheres. One needs to be able to generate hypotheses, using closed-system logic (SLP), but also to be able to subject them to possible corroboration or disproof, by open-system logic (PDP). The ongoing work of Karl J. Friston and J. Allan Hobson -- among others -- seems to corroborate and provide a thorough account and abundant mathematical and experimentally supported proofs to this effect.

Friston and Hobson's model of mentation by "active inference," in both dreaming (primary) and waking (secondary) consciousness demonstrates the necessity for both types of information processing in order to enable progressively better approximations of the world, while also reducing complexity and minimizing free energy of the overall system of understanding obtained in the brain-mind's virtual-reality approximation of the world.

To quote from the above-mentioned article that appeared in social media:

"The neuroscience community never bought into this notion, Anderson said, and now we have evidence from more than 1,000 brain scans showing absolutely no signs of left or right dominance. Anderson said he wasn't out to do some myth busting. His team's goal is to better understand brain lateralization to treat conditions such as Down syndrome, autism or schizophrenia, where the left and right hemispheres have atypical roles.

So, should you trash your app that tries to determine if you are a left-brain or right-brain thinker? Both sides of your brain, as well as neuroscientists, say yes."

It seems more nearly correct to say that although we may need to discard the left-right hemispheric division of labor as a useful but inaccurate heuristic device, it still seems correct to say that our mentation relies on two different systems of information processing: serial-linear processing (SLP) and parallel-distributed processing (PDP). These terms are adapted from the work of the late Andrew Tershakovec, M.D., in his book *The Mind: The Power that Changed the Planet* (2007). Tershakovec thought that SLP and PDP were divided more or less along hemispheric lines; he may have been quite mistaken, but his SLP and PDP correspond nicely with Daniel Kahneman's "System 1" (PDP, "fast" thinking) and "System 2" (SLP, "slow" thinking). Kahneman advises that Systems 1 and 2 be regarded merely as useful heuristic devices.

The collaborative work of Karl J. Friston and J. Allan Hobson (cf. esp. 2012 [\[download Friston & Hobson's 2012 article\]](#), 2014) has shown convincingly that learning and perception take place by "active inference." In active inference, hypotheses are generated to come up with possible explanations of the hidden causes of the sensory input as coming from exteroceptive or proprioceptive sources in the

environment. The hypotheses must be compared with sensory input in such a way as to subject the hypothesized explanations to to corroboration *and* disproof. If sensory input does not agree with a hypothesis generated from prior beliefs), the brain-mind can either modify, update, or discard the prior hypothesis and generate a new hypothesis reflecting this change; or it can alter the input to fit the prior hypothesis, such as when we are hearing or looking at audiovisual illusions, or when we need to focus narrowly on one voice in a noisy room or one spot in a visual field to make sense of it. If, however, the prior beliefs keep being confirmed despite mounting evidence that something is amiss, this condition may be described as involving "neurotic" thinking and behavior.

- AKS

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This special issue commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Karen's Horney's founding of the journal, the American Institute for Psychoanalysis, and the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis, contains a rich array of articles and reminiscences.

Horney, K. (1937). *The neurotic personality of our time*. New York: Norton.

Argues for the influence of culture on personality and develops a new paradigm for the structure of neurosis.

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Systematic critique of Freud's theory, especially its emphasis on biological factors and infantile origins. Stresses environmental factors, current character structure, and self-realization as the object of therapy.

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Describes the possibilities, techniques, and difficulties of both dyadic and self-analysis. Contains Horney's most fully developed case history, that of Clare, which is highly autobiographical.

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Focuses on the interpersonal strategies of compliance (moving toward), aggression (moving against), and detachment (moving away from) and the conflicts between these strategies (the basic conflict). A good place to start reading Horney.

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Focuses on the intrapsychic strategies of self-idealization, the search for glory, neurotic pride, neurotic claims, and tyrannical shoulds, all of which simultaneously defend against and increase self-hate. Integrates the interpersonal strategies into a complete system, but in an occasionally confusing manner. Horney's most complex and important book. Written for fellow analysts but lucid and accessible to laypersons.

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Essays published between 1923 and 1935, many originally in German, developing Horney's disagreements with the prevailing phallogocentric view of feminine psychology and advancing her own version of women's problems and the relations between the sexes. In their emphasis on the cultural construction of gender, these essays were decades ahead of their time.

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Collects Horney's essays on clinical issues and lectures from the courses she gave on analytic technique toward the end of her life. The lectures reveal a different side of Horney and are particularly relevant to current issues. The editor's introductions provide an overview of all of Horney's teachings about the process of psychotherapy.

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This assembles Horney's previously uncollected essays on gender, culture, and psychoanalysis and makes 18 previously unpublished items available for the first time. It also provides English versions of four hitherto untranslated essays. Supplements the essays in *Feminine Psychology*.

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