

# Why Horney?

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[The following statement was originally prepared as a contribution to a discussion of curriculum at the American Institute for Psychoanalysis. It is slightly modified here.]

The reasons for studying Horney are, I believe: (1) Horney's freedom from the weaknesses of many other psychoanalytic theories, (2) Horney's strengths, her unique contributions, and (3) the modernity and current relevance of Horney's teachings.

## **(1) Freedom from weaknesses.**

Most psychoanalytic theories, including self-psychology and object relations theories, derive from classical Freudian premises that have been under severe attack from "revisionists," of whom Horney was one of the earliest and most powerful, and that are now regarded with widespread skepticism. This is one of the reasons why psychoanalysis is largely ignored in psychology departments of universities, has lost much of its status and acceptance with the general public, and is in ill repute in many quarters.

In his influential critique of psychoanalysis, Frederick Crews has listed a number of principles that he and many others believe to be "erroneous or extremely open to doubt." These include:

1. "To become mentally healthy, we must vent our negative feelings and relive our most painful psychic experiences. The deeper we delve, and the harsher and more bitter the truths that we drag to the surface, the better off we will be."
2. "Through the aid of an objective therapist in whom we invest authority, trust, and love, we can not only arrive at an accurate diagnosis of our mental problems but also retrieve the key elements of our mental history in substantially accurate form, uncontaminated by the therapist's theoretical bias."
3. "Everything that we experience is preserved in either conscious or unconscious (repressed) memory."
4. "The content of our repressions is preponderantly sexual in nature. Therefore, sexual experiences can be regarded as bearing a unique susceptibility to repression and can accordingly be considered the key determinants of psychic life."
5. "The repressed unconscious continually tyrannizes over us by intruding its recorded-but-not-recalled fantasies and traumas upon our efforts to live in the present."
6. "Symptoms are 'residues and mnemonic symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences' (SE, 11:16), and 'dreaming is another kind of remembering' (SE, 17:51). Consequently, a

therapist's methodologically informed study of symptoms and dreams can lead (through however many detours) to faithful knowledge of an originating trauma."

7. "As a result of all these considerations, the most prudent and efficient way to treat psychological problems is not to address the patient's current situation, beliefs, and incapacities but to identify and remove the repressions that date from much earlier years."

Crews cites Richard Wollheim and Thomas Nagel to the effect that these principles "are so widely believed as to constitute . . . the psychological common sense of our era." He points out, however, that they have given rise to many serious problems, such as the repressed memory hysteria, that they are extremely weak epistemologically (see especially the work of Adolf Grünbaum), and that they are of dubious clinical value. As I have said, they have been subject to extensive and searching criticism and are largely responsible for the dismissive attitude toward psychoanalysis that has become more and more prevalent in our culture.

For present purposes, the important point to make is that Horney critiqued these principles as early as 1939, in *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, and that she constructed her mature theory on a different basis. Her theory is not subject, therefore, to the objections that have been raised to the highly questionable enterprise of recovering or reconstructing the past, especially early childhood, a reliance that is fundamental to mainstream psychoanalysis and its derivatives. The tendency has been to try to advance psychoanalytic theory by moving farther into the past, into pre-oedipal stages and infancy, a step that only increases its unreliability.

It would be possible to contrast Horney's position in detail with each of the seven principles cited above and to show how her synchronic model, which emphasizes present dynamics, is not subject to the difficulties entailed in the effort to explain the present in terms of the past and is therefore on firmer epistemological ground.

## **(2) Horney's strengths, her unique contribution.**

Horney is incontestably different from mainstream psychoanalysis and its derivatives, but this difference is a strength, not a weakness as it is sometimes felt to be. Not only does it exempt her from much of the largely justified criticism of psychoanalysis that has grown increasingly powerful over the past several decades, but it provides a fresh and as yet unrivaled approach to an understanding of the human psyche and the treatment of psychological problems.

Each psychological theory works better with some phenomena than with others, and none explains everything. As a literary critic, I have found that there are some works that do not lend themselves to a Horneyan analysis but also that there are a great many that do, and that these are from a wide variety of periods and cultures. There is a large body of psychological phenomena that Horney's theory explains much better than any other and for which it is the theory of choice. Horney's concepts of the interpersonal defensive moves and the conflicts between them, of the idealized image and the pride, shoulds, claims, and self-hate that it generates, of intrapsychic conflicts that produce an oscillation between pride and self-hate and a crossfire of conflicting shoulds, of a central inner conflict between the pride system and the emerging real self--all these are extremely powerful explanatory and therapeutic tools. Horney developed these ideas in the

1940s, but they have not been superseded, or even properly appreciated, and they are as fresh and important today as they were then.

Partly as a result of political forces within psychoanalysis and of shifting intellectual fashions, Horney's ideas have not had the impact they should have had; but the fact is that one still cannot find an equally powerful theory that deals with the range of phenomena that Horney addressed. There is no better place to go if we want to "address the patient's current situation, beliefs, and incapacities."

Despite the fact that she does not play a prominent role in current psychoanalytic discourse, Horney has influenced the larger psychoanalytic community in numerous ways, and many of her ideas and techniques have been assimilated, usually without acknowledgment, into theory and clinical practice.

Among Horney's strengths that I have not yet addressed are her clinical teachings and the therapeutic potentialities of her personality theory. Since I am not a clinician, I may not be the best person to make the case for the clinical value of Horney's teachings, but I have edited her essays and lectures on therapy (*The Therapeutic Process*) for the Yale University Press, and I have been deeply impressed by her understanding of the therapist-patient relationship and the dynamics of change and growth. To quote from my Preface, her ideas about the therapeutic process are valuable because they are highly pertinent to the continuing concerns of clinicians, both practical and theoretical. Once more ahead of her time, Horney saw therapy as a collaborative enterprise and developed an interactive model in which the therapist is open, frank, and supportive and experiences growth along with the patient. She was highly sensitive to the ways in which the therapist's personality can both facilitate and obstruct the healing process, and she had a great deal to say about the therapist's "neurotic remnants" and countertransference phenomena. She was operating within the framework of her theory, to be sure, but very flexibly. She anticipated continuous revision of her ideas by herself and others as a result of clinical experience.

In a review of *The Therapeutic Process*, R. H. Balsam of Yale University wrote: "Graduate students, researchers, faculty, and practitioners of theoretical and clinical psychoanalysis will find this collection of great interest." Karen Horney was one of the great clinicians of the twentieth century, and one of the great teachers and trainers of clinicians.

### **(3) The modernity & current relevance of Horney's teachings.**

Horney's ideas are not old-fashioned or outmoded, as some believe, but are very much in tune with much modern thinking and relevant to present concerns. As we have seen, her model of the therapeutic process anticipated many currently fashionable ideas, some of which go back even farther than Horney to Sandor Ferenczi.

Horney's emphasis on the present structure of the personality is not old-fashioned but is far more compatible with twentieth-century thought than the diachronic thinking that characterizes mainstream psychoanalysis and its derivatives. Explaining the present in terms of the past is the characteristic move of nineteenth-century thought, of which Freud was a product. Explaining

phenomena in terms of their function within the current structure is a more modern way of thinking and one that works much better when an accurate version of the past is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to recover. The emphasis on early childhood in mainstream psychoanalysis and its derivatives has resulted in the development of many competing myths of origin and in the circular explanation of present difficulties in terms of early experiences that were inferred from those difficulties to begin with. Horney addressed many of the concerns that have become prominent in self-psychology and object relations theory (problems of the self, neurosis as a product of inadequate nurturing and disturbed human relations), but without the baggage of the diachronic model that these theories inherited from the nineteenth-century thinking of Freud.

When I began working with Horney's theory many years ago, one of the objections to Horney was that hers was a cultural theory that was also culture bound, that it worked very well with Horney's patient population of upper-middle-class New Yorkers of the 1930s and 40s but did not have wide applicability. My use of Horney's theory in the study of literature has proved this to be untrue. I have published critical studies using Horney to explicate literary works from a wide variety of periods and cultures. The authors include Sophocles, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Stendhal, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Dostoevsky, Hardy, Ibsen, Conrad, Bellow, Barth, and many more; and my students have worked with a host of others, including some who are quite contemporary (see a full listing in Paris, *Imagined Human Beings* (NYU Press, 1997)). There have been Horneyan analyses of classical and contemporary Indian, Chinese, and Japanese literature by natives of those countries; and within the past several years Horney has been translated into Russian and Chinese. Indeed, a Chinese publisher is bringing out a "Karen Horney Series" that will include all of Horney's books as well as literary criticism that employs Horney theory.

The point is that Horney's theory has very wide applicability. Despite vast differences in culture, the human psyche hasn't changed very much, if at all, in the past several thousand years, and it is highly unlikely that we suddenly have a new breed of humans who do not employ the kinds of defenses Horney described and suffer from the kinds of interpersonal and intrapsychic conflicts she analyzed so brilliantly. Indeed, the wide (and, I predict, enduring) applicability of Horney's theory may be partly the result of the fact that it describes the human complications and variations of some of the most basic strategies of defense in the animal kingdom--fight, flight, and submission. The forms these strategies take differ from culture to culture, as does the strategy that is most prevalent or highly privileged, but the underlying patterns remain much the same and have been well analyzed by Karen Horney. These patterns have not suddenly disappeared in our time.

Far from being outmoded, Horney's theory is, in fact, more compatible with current scientific findings than mainstream theories that are based on a now discredited mechanistic model of the human mind. In his recently completed book--*The New Cognitive Model of the Mind and Its Implications for Psychotherapy*--Andrew Tershakovec shows that Horney anticipated the holistic model of the mind that has emerged from neurophysiology and the cognitive sciences and that her ideas about the real self and her conception of the nature of neurosis and the objectives of therapy are supported by recent discoveries in these disciplines. When this book is published, Horney's will be seen to be a theory for the future, rather than a relic of the past.

Although Horney's theory has distinctive features that separate it from more traditional psychoanalytic thinking and that constitute its strength, it also has similarities to other theories that connect it to the larger body of psychological thought. I have discussed these connections in Chapter 29 of *Karen Horney: A Psychoanalyst's Search for Self-Understanding* (Yale, 1994), a portion of which (pp. 214-216) I should like to quote here:

Horneyan theory deals with many of the same issues as other psychoanalytic theories that have remained within the mainstream. It differs from ego psychology, self-psychology, and object-relations theory in important ways, but it shares many of their concerns (Danielian 1988; Paul 1989; Ingram and Lerner 1992; Mitchell 1992).

Horney's "basic anxiety" is much the same as 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 the idealized image, and there is a crisis later in life when we realize that our search for glory is not going to succeed. Horney's work is also relevant to Heinz Lichtenstein's theory of identity, since Lichtenstein's identity themes can often be understood in Horneyan terms as constellations of defenses and inner conflicts.

Like Kohut and his fellows, Horney is interested in problems of the self; and like Guntrip, Fairbairn, Winnicott, 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 her denial of primary narcissism and from object-relations theorists in her focus on present structure. Horney's ideas can be integrated to some extent with those of Margaret Mahler if we see her defensive strategies as originating in the vicissitudes of the separation/individuation process. Fear of separation generates the movement toward other people, whereas fear of reengulfment (or perhaps lack of adequate initial symbiosis) generates longings for power and independence (Paris 1991a, 184-85; see also Feiring 1983).

Horney's mature theory has parallels with and implications for other schools of thought as well. It anticipates many of the ideas of R. D. Laing (Paris 1982, 1986b) and Alice Miller (Westcott 1986). It helped to inspire the interpersonal school (Leary 1957; Teyber 1988), and it provided a model for therapies that focus on the current situation (Wachtel 1977). Horney's ideas have influenced the DSM-III and its successors through Theodore Millon (1981), who has served on the DSM-III Task Force and on the Committee on Personality Disorders. Indeed, they have made their way, often unacknowledged, into the array of ideas and techniques that most psychotherapists now employ.

The fact that Horneyan theory is based on the idea of a "real self" makes it incompatible with Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and other postmodern theories that deny an authentic personal identity. The idea of a coherent self that is the core of our personal identity is out of keeping with the current propensity for decentering, deconstructing, and denying the self, which is often seen to be merely the locus of cultural codes and influences. For those who deny a self, Horney's theory is predicated upon an illusion, but from a Horneyan perspective the belief that the self is inevitably derivative, inauthentic, and fragmented is a product of inner conflict and self-alienation, which is then generalized as the human condition.

Despite the current unfashionableness of the idea, Horney is far from alone in positing a "real self" and in regarding healthy growth as a process of actualizing it. Her position is akin to the developmental, self, and object relations approach articulated by James Masterson in *The Real Self*, where he observes that "after all, in our daily toil with our patients, our work revolves around a person with a self, not a collection of objects and an ego" (1985, 5; see also Stern 1985). Horney's real self bears some resemblance to Kohut's "nuclear self" (1977, 1984) and even more to Winnicott's "true self" (1965). According to Winnicott, as a result of inadequate nurturing "something that could have become the individual becomes hidden away . . . protected from further impingement" by a "false self" that develops reactively and supersedes "the true impulsive self which might under more favorable circumstances have been gathering strength" (1987, 61). This sounds like Horney, as does much of Alice Miller's discussion of the loss of and search for the true self in childhood (1981, 1983) and 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 (1965). I am not proposing a Horneyan influence, though that is a possibility, or an exact equivalence of ideas, since there are often theoretical differences too complex to be specified here.

There is no doubt that Horney influenced Third Force psychology, which shares her vision of human nature and human values and builds on many of her basic premises. The chief spokesman for Third Force psychology is Abraham Maslow (1964, 1968, 1970, 1971), who knew Horney, adopted her conception of the real self, and developed a theory that is complementary to hers. Although modern psychology had been most influenced by the Freudian and the experimental-positivistic-behavioristic schools, Maslow felt that various other groups were "coalescing into a third, increasingly comprehensive theory" (1968, vi) with a different philosophy of human nature. The difference has been defined in a number of ways--greater optimism, a more holistic approach to human behavior, a richer array of inherent needs and values; but most crucial is the contention that in addition to tension-reduction and conditioning we are motivated by an evolutionary constructive force that urges us to realize our potentialities. We all have an intrinsic nature that it is our object in life to fulfill. Whether they call it self-actualization, self-realization, integration, psychological health, individuation, autonomy, creativity, or productivity, Third Force psychologists agree that the highest value for human beings is to become "fully human," everything they "*can* become" (145).

Horney's ideas about the real self are at once foundational to her theory and the most elusive and controversial aspect of it, especially in the current postmodern climate. I happen to think that the postmodern version of the self (or lack of self) is wrong, indeed, that it is the rationalization of a self-alienated condition. I believe that Horney's vision of the self is solidly based in clinical experience (see my essay on this topic - posted on this website--in the June, 1999 issue of *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*) and that it provides a far better basis for psychotherapy than the postmodern models. The contrast between Horneyan and postmodern versions of psychotherapy is too big a topic to take up here; but postmodernism has not necessarily arrived at the truth, despite its illusions to the contrary, and Horney should not be dismissed because she is out of step with its very dubious versions of human nature. The issue has not been decided; the debate must go on.