

2221 Theory & Practice 1: Lecture 6

Karen Horney¹

(1885-1952)

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¹ The second syllable of Horney's name rhymes with 'high' NOT 'key'.

Introduction



Her father was a religious (Jewish) man, an authoritarian, whom his children called ““the bible thrower”” (Boeree, 1997: n. p.) because that is what he would do! The father had been previously married and had brought four children into his new marriage with a bride 19 years his junior. Karen had an older brother, called Berndt.

Boeree (1997) records that Karen felt deprived of her father’s affection believing him to have preferred Berndt to her. However, the father, a sea captain, took her on three long voyages and brought her gifts from all over the world. Nevertheless, she became attached to her mother. After developing a crush on her brother and suffering his resulting rejection, she suffered her first bout of depression, a condition that would dog her throughout her life. (In fact, she is a good case of someone who was brilliant in helping others but seemingly unable to get help for herself.)

When Karen was 19, her mother divorced her father and left him taking Karen and Berndt with her. Two years later Karen entered medical school which was something not done by women at the time. In 1909, she married Oskar Horney, a law student and they had three daughters. Her husband was a rigid disciplinarian² as her father had been (Boeree, 1997: n. p.). 1923 was a horror year for them with Oskar’s business collapsing, the onset of his meningitis and Karen’s beloved brother dying at 40. Karen became very depressed and suicidal. Three years later, Karen and daughters moved away from Oskar (1926) and later moved to Brooklyn, USA, a popular place for Jewish refugees from Germany in the 1930s. Oskar and Karen divorced in 1938.

² But, according to Paris (2002a), Oskar was not considered by Karen to be strong enough for her!

1. Horney's unhappy relationships

Horney had an extremely poor history with regard to relationships with women (estrangements from her mother and daughter) but particularly men, with many affairs in which she sought desperately to be loved, sometimes in affairs conducted simultaneously. Her most famous affair was with Eric Fromm, the well-known sociologist who learned psychoanalysis from her. This relationship ended in spiteful hostility on her part. Aspects of her psychology can be related to her life history – which is not to say that her theories can be reduced or simply explained by her own experience. She spent much time thinking about the issue of feminine psychology and concluded that Freudian psychoanalysis was heavily influenced by masculine biases, which she sought to repudiate. (If one were inclined to interpret this direction analytically, one could say that Horney had transferred the problem of her supposed rejection by her father in favour of her brother into the area of her relationship with psychoanalysis. That is, she had identified Freud's biases against women with a sensitivity borne of the supposed rejection of her father. Freud was rejecting her [in his biases against women] just as her father allegedly rejected her.)

Paris (2002b: n. p.), a major expert in Horney's psychology and life, understands Horney's psychology as an attempt to understand her own problems, particularly her problem with respect to the overvaluation of the love of the male. Horney herself even speaks of women in this 'love-starved' category as seeking revenge for the rejection they have suffered at the hands of the father or brother (Paris, 2002b: n. p.). However, in 1935, to the annoyance of many feminists, Horney gave up the pursuit of any idea of a distinctive feminine psychology and concentrated, instead, on a 'gender neutral' theory.

2. The three phases of Horney's development

Paris (2002a: n. p.) outlined three important phases that can be identified in Horney's work: **first**, an initial stage in which Horney remained within orthodox Freudian theory but attempted to modify ideas about feminine psychology through a series of essays; **second**, the first phase had led her to ask about the influence of culture and interpersonal relationships on neurosis. This questioning led her to replace Freud's instinctual focus with a cultural basis; **finally**, with her books *Our Inner Conflicts* (1945/1966) and

Neurosis and Human Growth (1950) she unveiled her mature theory in which she understood neuroses to be attempts to ‘cope with the anxiety produced by feeling unsafe, unloved and unvalued by disowning . . . spontaneous feelings and developing elaborate strategies of defense’ (Paris, 2002a: n. p.).

In this lecture, the concentration will be essentially on the third phase. Wittels (cited in Paris, 2002b: n. p.) argued that some of the theorists who followed Freud and Adler should more accurately be identified as neo-Adlerians. Certainly, Horney was influenced by Adler’s work, particularly in her mature work, for Adler identified the desire in all neurotics to be first³ (Paris, 2002b) which prompts them to take up the ‘search for glory’.

3. Horney’s differences with Freudianism

One major difference that Horney has with Freud was that Horney understood neurosis to be a **distortion** of normal basic, human needs. Hence, she assumed neurosis as being ‘more continuous with normal life than previous therapists’ had thought (Boeree, 1997). Neurotics are not in one pile and normal people in another with each being clearly demarcated from the other. Neurotics evidence a need for affection and approval but so do we all. We would have a sorry life without these things. But, the neurotic person has an inordinate, inflated need for such things.

Horney had a central assumption that humanity is relational (rather than being primarily instinctual, as in Freud). Neuroses proceed from disturbed human relations and compulsive drives towards sex and power *are specific to neurosis* not a general feature of human life (Horney, 1945/1966: 12-13). Freud assumed that the drive towards pleasure explained human psychology.⁴ However, Horney took the position that this drive only became evident after human relationships had broken down.

Freud was deeply pessimistic about the possibility of anyone being cured of neurosis because he assumed that the basic conflict between instinctual drives and a forbidding environment must arise in all persons and that the conflict between desire and fear can only be resolved through better compromises. Horney was much more optimistic. She

³ Isn’t this issue that Horney struggled with all her life?

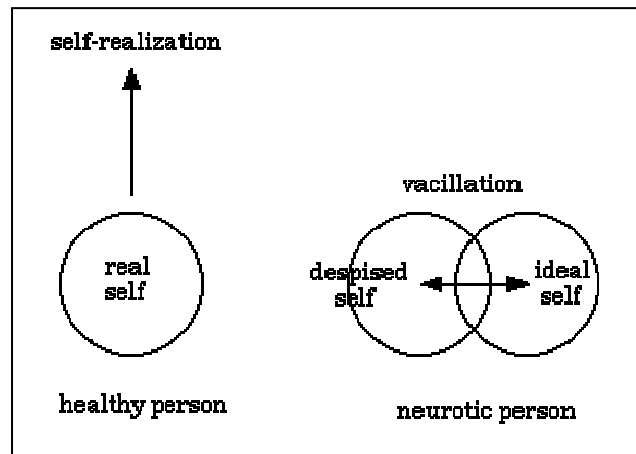
⁴ Adler had also explained human psychology in terms of one instinct, the drive for power or superiority.

believed that basic conflict did not necessarily need to arise in the first place and that if it did, that diligence could lead to a cure.

4. Horney's basic theory

a) Summary

To understand Horney, is to recognise that Horney believed we have two selves: the real self, a self that is possible to actualise or realise; and an idealised self, an impossible self, one that can never be realisable (Paris, 2002c: n. p.). We need to complicate this picture by adding that we also have an empirical existing self as of this moment.



Neurotic people live with an image of an impossible self shadowed by the actual self which is despised because it falls far short of the possibilities of the ideal. Hence, neurotics are always divided people, divided within them-selves. Their inner conflict centres on their inability to wish for anything *wholeheartedly*, says Horney. Their wishes are scattered and go off in different directions because they have no inner sense of self-coherence.

The tragedy of this situation is that an in-progress neurotic structure is erected to deal with this sense of personal disunity. This created structure soon proves to be inadequate which leads to the building of another structure and so on. At the end of the process, the palliative structures become as problematic as the initial conflict.

b) Development of neurosis (Refer to attached figure, p. 12)

Neurosis is generated by parental indifference⁵ which Horney believed was even worse than outright abuse because children can emerge from the latter unscathed but the effect

⁵ However, she elaborates on the conditions that seem to induce basic anxiety: direct and indirect domination, erratic behaviour, lack of respect for child's inner needs, lack of real guidance, disparaging attitudes, too much or too little admiration, lack of reliable warmth, overprotection, isolation from other children, injustice, discrimination, unkept promises, hostile atmosphere in the home.

of indifference is usually more profound. Indifference leads to what she called *basic anxiety*. From this basic anxiety stems feelings of **helplessness, isolation and hostility**.

1) Different types

Each of these is associated with a fundamental action or attitude towards others.

Helplessness is associated with '**moving towards**' others; isolation with '**moving away**'; hostility with '**moving against**'. (See diagram below.) Horney along with other post-Freudians is interested in persons-in-relationship, more focussed on the person-in-society.

Hence, parental indifference leads to basic anxiety leads to the three feelings of helplessness, isolation, and hostility. These steps are not determined as if one must lead to another. However, once a person feels the **BASIC CONFLICT** and fails to acknowledge it solutions must then be sought for the resulting suffering of not knowing what one wants and for the inner feeling of disunity.

By way of contrast, Freud can be regarded as postulating a basic conflict between instinctual drives and forbidding conscience. However, Horney believed this conflict to be secondary not primary because the opposition between desire and fear is not fundamental enough, according to Horney, to explain for the deep division within the neurotic self which leads to ruin. The problem is rather than the neurotic is *unable to wish for anything wholeheartedly* because his wishes are scattered and go in uncoordinated directions.

Freud believed the basic conflict to be universal and insoluble. All one could do was to achieve better compromises. Towards the end of his life, Freud hypothesised that the life and death instincts explained the basic conflict. Contrariwise, Horney believed that the basic conflict did not need to arise at all and was, therefore, not universal. Furthermore, she believed that if it arose it could be successfully resolved even though that demanded great effort.

First, the person attempts to solve the problem of the presence of the conflict by *elevating one attitude above the others*. (These attitudes, *in themselves*, are not problematic for each of which may be appropriate in a particular situation. But, they

come into conflict with each other when the person will not accept the presence of inner conflict.) So, one of three trends emerges as more dominant: towards others, against others, away from others. The other attitudes will still be operative but will be muted.

a) 'moving towards' type

A great need for affection and approval marked by compulsiveness, indiscrimination and general anxiety or despondency when frustrated. Personality is centred around human need for intimacy and belonging. Insatiable desire to feel safe and unbounded desire for affection. Taboo against aggressive behaviour. Automatically shoulders blame. Pervasive feeling of being weak and helpless.

However, strongly repressed features are: callous lack of interest in others, defiant attitudes, exploiting tendencies, tendency to control and manipulate, relentless need to excel or to enjoy vindictive triumphs.

b) 'moving against' type

These types assume everyone is hostile. Motto is 'only the fittest survive'. Primary need is to control others often by exploiting and outsmarting others. Is hard and tough and hates to lose. Zest and intelligence will make her a dependable worker but job is only a means to an end.

c) 'moving away' type

General estrangement from others. Have a highly developed sense of intrusion which arouses strong anxiety. May even resent omniscience of God because of intrusion. Do not want emotional involvement with others; want to be left alone. Have a strong need for self-sufficiency which implies a large measure of resourcefulness. Hate to be sick because dependency issues arise. Need for independence is compulsive and indiscriminate. May be panicked at the thought of getting married. This type's first question concerning others is, Will this person interfere with me? [This person can be identified as Jung's introverted type but unlike Jung who believes that this trait can be balanced by reconciliation with its opposite, Horney regards introversion as problematic requiring analysis. Analysis would uncover why the introversion exists at all.]

The **Second Solution** is to put distance between oneself and others to avoid conflict in social situations. Although this attitude is one of the original ones in opposition, Horney also believes it will be used to solve the basic conflict. Hence, all neurotics will tend to

show strong elements of moving away from others, that is, they will tend to avoid social interactions where conflicts will tend to come to the surface.

The **Third Solution**, the most important one, is moving away from the real self which is marked by the creating of an image, **a self-inflating Idealised Image (I-I)**⁶.

This image is invariably flattering to the person -it may even be a grandiose vision of the self- even though the person is unaware of that. The person may centre completely on the image convincing herself that she *is* this image. Or, she may focus on the discrepancy between the **I-I** and the real image. Such a focus will bring her under the condemnation of the '**should**' but person remains confident that she will become the image if she fulfills the demands of the 'shoulds'. Or, if she realises that she can never achieve the dictates of the shoulds so as to reach the **I-I** then self-punishment and rejection result. However, the latter person may be closer to health even though she feels worse than the others because she is closer to realising what her real self is!

The biggest drawback of the **I-I** is its contribution to self-alienation. One cannot suppress parts of oneself and not avoid self-estrangement. [A theme that is dominant in Gestalt therapy and in existentialist therapy.] Although the **I-I** was constructed to deal with the basic conflict it establishes a new conflict in the personality between itself and the real self.

We now encounter:

1. **Those who identify** with the **I-I** are narcissistic because they believe they are as wonderful as the inner image dictates.
2. **Those who try to measure up** to the demands of the inner dictator are perfectionist.
3. Some also exist **who will not accept the rule** of the inner dictator and hence, live their lives in desperate rebellion as defiant romantics.

⁶Freud called the I-I 'ego-ideal' which was located in the superego. The I-I is also known as narcissism in Freud's theories. In Adler's psychology, it is known as 'the striving for perfection'.

2) Externalisation

The **I-I** is the centrepiece of the neurotic need to create an artificial harmony in the personality. However, it is always in danger of breaking down. Hence, extra methods are employed to maintain unity. Horney speaks of 'externalisation' as the primary extra method used. In this ingenious method, the neurotic who faces an unbearable inner turmoil experiences internal processes as if they occurred outside them (i.e., 'projection'). He also holds external forces responsible for his own difficulties. I may feel someone is angry with me but it may be that I am angry with myself. In fact, neurotics with **I-I**s will feel self-contempt because they will experience the real versus **I-I** conflict. In the process of externalisation, I might either feel self-contempt for others or feel others despise me. Externalisation leads to a sense of emptiness and shallowness because it is an active process of self-elimination.

Horney warns therapists not to try to remove self-contempt from patient until hopelessness is reduced and the grip of the **I-I** is lessened.

3) Other methods of maintaining unity

Despite all that has been tried to this point, problems remain. Hence, more approaches to artificial harmony are tried. (See diagram.)

4) Consequences

a) fears

The protective structure is brittle and this gives rise to fear that equilibrium will be disturbed. Person will experience elation, depression, fatigue unexpectedly which creates feeling of uncertainty.

i) fear of insanity

If **I-I** is threatened or if mounting tension arises from unconscious rage then self-control is put in jeopardy.

ii) fear of exposure

Stands to reason that if one's life is founded on an illusion that it may be uncovered at any time.

ii) fear of changing anything in oneself

Change is feared because it may be a change for the worse. Or, one may find that one is unable to change.

b) impoverishment of personality

Human energies are wasted in the suffering of neurosis in trying to live an illusion.

Person can never put full heart into anything. Indecisiveness, ineffectualness and inertia rule. Ego -centricity is a feature where goodness and love are pretenses. An unconscious arrogance always lurks in the background.

c) hopelessness

For the great 19th century Lutheran philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (pronounced Sō' rĕn Kir' -k gôr) (1813-1855), the forerunner of existentialism, despair is ultimately the state of failing to be ourselves. But, for Horney, hopelessness is the product of unresolved conflicts.

d) sadistic trends

Persons without hope may (and often do) turn to destructive means to express that hopelessness. At the same time, they may attempt restitution by living vicariously (through others' deeds).

5. Task of therapy

The therapist aims to make the person aware of the entire neurotic structure. However, person can only give up the I-I if the needs that led to its creation are diminished. Hence, danger results from trying to change the structure of the personality by sheer will-power.

Hence, therapy identifies the predominant attitude, the I-I in detail, the externalisations. The other part of therapy is to examine conflicts in the basic conflict *and how they operate in specific instances in the client's present life*. The therapist will need to judge how much insight the client can stand at present and in what areas insight is likely to have any meaning for him.

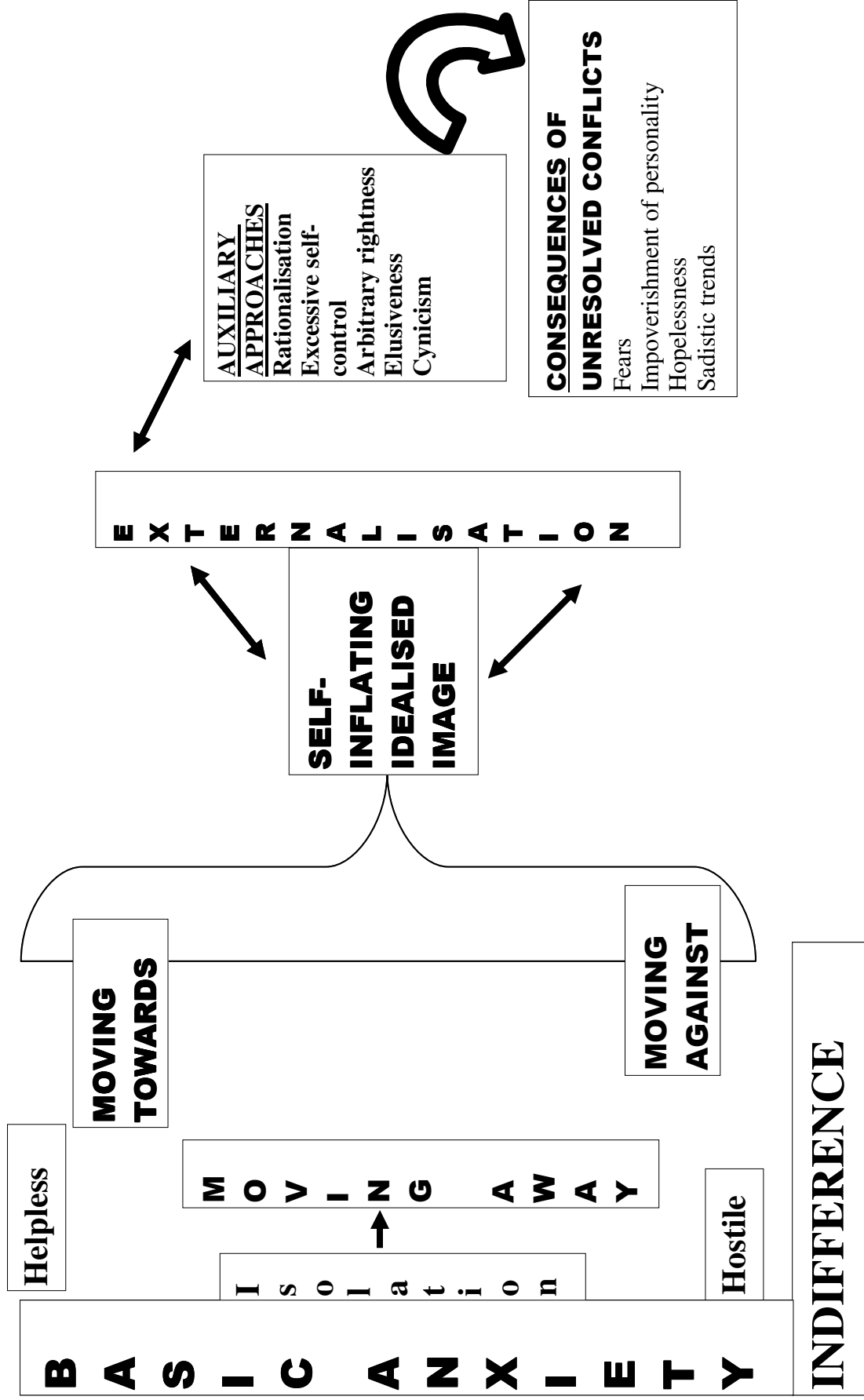
In Horney (1950/1991: 343) she emphasises the need for that insight to be more than just intellectual. The intellectual must be combined with the emotional to yield 'emotional

insight'. (Horney, 1950/1991: 345) also spoke of the need for clients to emotionally participate in the process of therapy.

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Figure 1. Karen Horney's Understanding of Neurosis



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