6.3: Horney's Shifting Perspective on Psychodynamic Theory

Horney did not establish a specific theory of personality. Rather, her career proceeded through a series of stages in which she addressed the issues that were of particular concern to her at the time. Accordingly, her theories can be grouped into three stages: feminine psychology, culture and disturbed human relationships, and finally, the mature theory in which she focused on the distinction between interpersonal and intrapsychic defenses (Paris, 1994).

**Feminine Psychology**

Horney was neither the first, nor the only, significant woman in the early days of psychodynamic theory and psychoanalysis. However, women such as Helene Deutsch, Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, and Melanie Klein remained faithful to Freud’s basic theories. In contrast, Horney directly challenged Freud’s theories, and offered her own alternatives. In doing so, she offered a very different perspective on the psychology of women and personality development in girls and women. Her papers have been collected and published in *Feminine Psychology* by her friend and colleague Harold Kelman (1967), and an excellent overview of their content can be found in the biography written by Rubins (1978).

In her first two papers, *On the Genesis of the Castration Complex in Women* (Horney, 1923/1967) and *The Flight from Womanhood* (Horney, 1926/1967), Horney challenged the Freudian perspective on the psychological development of females. Although she acknowledged Freud’s pioneering theories, even as they applied to women, she believed that they suffered from a male perspective, and that the men who originally offered these theories simply did not understand the feminine perspective. Horney agreed that girls develop penis envy, but not that it is the only dynamic force influencing development during the phallic stage. Girls envy the ability of boys to urinate standing up, the fact that boys can see their genitals, and the relative ease with which boys can satisfy their desire for masturbation. More important for girls than penis envy, however, was the fear and anxiety young girls experience with regard to vaginal injury were they to actually have intercourse with their fathers (which, Horney agreed, they may fantasize). Thus, they experience a
unique dynamic force called **female genital anxiety**. Another element of the castration complex in women, according to Horney, was the consequence of castration fantasies that she called **wounded womanhood** (incorporating the belief that the girl had been castrated).

Far more important than these basic processes, however, was the male bias inherent in society and culture. The very name **phallic** stage implies that only someone with a phallus (penis) can achieve sexual satisfaction and healthy personality development. Girls are repeatedly made to feel inferior to boys, feminine values are considered inferior to masculine values, even motherhood is considered a burden for women to bear (according to the Bible, the pain of childbirth is a curse from God!). In addition, male-dominated societies do not provide women with adequate outlets for their creative drives. As a result, many women develop a **masculinity complex**, involving feelings of revenge against men and the rejection of their own feminine traits. Thus, it may be true that women are more likely to suffer from anxiety and other psychological disorders, but this is not due to an inherent inferiority as proposed by Freud. Rather, women find it difficult in a patriarchal society to fulfill their personal development in accordance with their individual personality (unless they naturally happen to fit into society’s expectations).

Perhaps the most curious aspect of these early studies was the fact that Horney turned the tables on Freud and his concept of penis envy. The female’s biological role in childbirth is vastly superior (if that is a proper term) to that of the male. Horney noted that many boys express an intense envy of pregnancy and motherhood. If this so-called **womb envy** is the male counterpart of penis envy, which is the greater problem? Horney suggests that the apparently greater need of men to depreciate women is a reflection of their unconscious feelings of inferiority, due to the very limited role they play in childbirth and the raising of children (particularly breast-feeding infants, which they cannot do). In addition, the powerful creative drives and excessive ambition that are characteristic of many men can be viewed, according to Horney, as overcompensation for their limited role in parenting. Thus, as wonderful and intimate as motherhood may be, it can be a burden in the sense that the men who dominate society have turned it against women. This is, of course, an illogical state of affairs, since the children being born and raised by women are also the children of the very men who then feel inferior and psychologically threatened.

In a later paper, Horney (1932/1967) carried these ideas a step further. She suggested that, during the Oedipus stage, boys naturally judge the size of their penis as inadequate sexually with regard to their mother. They dread this inadequacy, which leads to anxiety and fear of rejection. This proves to be quite frustrating, and in accordance with the frustration-aggression hypothesis, the boy becomes angry and aggressive toward his mother. For men who are unable to overcome this issue, their adult sexual life becomes an ongoing effort to conquer and possess as many women as possible (a narcissistic overcompensation for their feelings of inadequacy). Unfortunately, according to Horney, these men become very upset with any woman who then expects a long-term or meaningful relationship, since that would require him to then prove his manhood in other, non-sexual ways.

For women, one of the most significant problems that results from these development processes is a desperate need to be in a relationship with a man, which Horney addressed in two of her last papers on feminine psychology: *The Overvaluation of Love* (1934/1967) and *The Neurotic Need for Love* (1937/1967). She recognized in many of her patients an obsession with having a relationship with a man, so much so that all other aspects of life seem unimportant. While others had considered this an inherent characteristic of women, Horney insisted that characteristics such as this **overvaluation of love** always include a significant portion of tradition and culture. Thus, it is not an inherent need in women, but one that has accompanied the patriarchal society’s demeaning of women, leading to low self-esteem that can only be overcome within society by becoming a wife and mother. Indeed, Horney found that many women suffer an
intense fear of not being normal. Unfortunately, as noted above, the men these women are seeking relationships with are themselves seeking to avoid long-term relationships (due to their own insecurities). This results in an intense and destructive attitude of rivalry between women (at least, those women caught up in this neurotic need for love). When a woman loses a man to another woman, which may happen again and again, the situation can lead to depression, permanent feelings of insecurity with regard to feminine self-esteem, and profound anger toward other women. If these feelings are repressed, and remain primarily unconscious, the effect is that the woman searches within her own personality for answers to her failure to maintain the coveted relationship with a man. She may feel shame, believe that she is ugly, or imagine that she has some physical defect. Horney described the potential intensity of these feelings as “self-tormenting.”

In 1935, just a few years after coming to America, Horney rather abruptly stopped studying the psychology of women (though her last paper on the subject was not published until 1937). Bernard Paris found the transcript of a talk that Horney had delivered that year to the National Federation of Professional and Business Women’s Clubs, which provided her reasoning for this change in her professional direction (see Paris, 1994). First, Horney suggested that women should be suspicious of any general interest in feminine psychology, since it usually represents an effort by men to keep women in their subservient position. In order to avoid competition, men praise the values of being a loving wife and mother. When women accept these same values, they themselves begin to demean any other pursuits in life. They become a teacher because they consider themselves unattractive to men, or they go into business because they aren’t feminine and lack sex appeal (Horney, cited in Paris, 1994). The emphasis on attracting men and having children leads to a “cult of beauty and charm,” and the overvaluation of love. The consequence of this tragic situation is that as women become mature, they become more anxious due to their fear of displeasing men:

…The young woman feels a temporary security because of her ability to attract men, but mature women can hardly hope to escape being devalued even in their own eyes. And this feeling of inferiority robs them of the strength for action which rightly belongs to maturity.

Inferiority feelings are the most common evil of our time and our culture. To be sure we do not die of them, but I think they are nevertheless more disastrous to happiness and progress than cancer or tuberculosis. (pg. 236; Horney cited in Paris, 1994)

The key to the preceding quote is Horney’s reference to culture. Having been in America for a few years at this point, she was already questioning the difference between the greater opportunities for women in America than in Europe (though the difference was merely relative). She also emphasized that when women are demeaned by society, this had negative consequences on men and children. Thus, she wanted to break away from any perspective that led to challenges between men and women:

…First of all we need to understand that there are no unalterable qualities of inferiority of our sex due to laws of God or of nature. Our limitations are, for the greater part, culturally and socially conditioned. Men who have lived under the same conditions for a long time have developed similar attitudes and shortcomings.

Once and for all we should stop bothering about what is feminine and what is not. Such concerns only undermine our energies…In the meantime what we can do is to work together for the full development of the human personalities of all for the sake of general welfare. (pg. 238; Horney cited in Paris, 1994)
In her final paper on feminine psychology, Horney (1937/1967) concludes her discussion of the neurotic need for love with a general discussion of the relationship between anxiety and the need for love. Of course, this is true for both boys and girls. This conclusion provided a clear transition from Horney’s study of the psychology of women to her more general perspectives on human development, beginning with the child’s need for security and the anxiety that arises when that security seems threatened.

Discussion Question: After a number of years studying feminine psychology, Horney came to believe that women are no different than any other minority group, and she began to pursue different directions in her career. Are the problems faced by women different than other minority groups? If so, how are they different?

**Anxiety and Culture**

In the introduction to *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, Horney (1937) makes three important points. First, she acknowledged that neuroses have their roots in childhood experiences, but she also considered the experiences of adulthood to be equally important. Second, she believed that neuroses can only develop within a cultural context. They may stem from individual experience, but their form and expression are intimately tied to one’s cultural setting. And finally, she emphasized that she was not rejecting Freud’s basic theory. Though she disagreed with many of his ideas, she considered it an honor to build upon the foundation of his “gigantic achievements.” To do so, she wrote, helps to avoid the danger of stagnation. If any more evidence than her word was necessary to demonstrate her loyalty to Freud, in this introduction we also find mention of Alfred Adler. Although Horney acknowledges some similarities with Adler’s perspective, she insists that her ideas are grounded in Freudian theory, and she describes Adler’s work as having become sterile and one-sided.

Horney believed that anxiety was a natural state of all living things, something the German philosophers had called *Angst der Kreatur* (anxiety of the creature), a feeling that one is helpless against such forces as illness, old age, and death. We first experience this anxiety as infants, and it remains with us throughout life. It does not, however, lead to neurotic anxiety. But if a child is not cared for, if their anxiety is not alleviated by the protection of their parents, the child may develop basic anxiety:

> The condition that is fostered…is an insidiously increasing, all-pervading feeling of being lonely and helpless in a hostile world…This attitude as such does not constitute a neurosis but it is the nutritive soil out of which a definite neurosis may develop at any time. (pg. 89; Horney, 1937)

Thus, in contrast to Freud’s belief that anxiety followed the threat of id impulses breaking free of the unconscious mind, Horney places anxiety before behavior. The child, through interactions with other people (particularly the parents), strives to alleviate its anxiety. If the child does not find support, then basic anxiety develops, and neurotic disorders become a distinct possibility. From that point forward, the child’s drives and impulses are motivated by anxiety, rather than being the cause of anxiety as proposed by Freud. Basic anxiety is considered basic for two reasons, one of which is that it is the source of neuroses. The other reason is that it arises out of early, but disturbed, relationships with the parents. This leads to feelings of hostility toward the parents, and Horney considered there to be a very close connection between anxiety and hostility. And yet, the child remains dependent on the parents, so it must not exhibit that hostility. This creates a vicious circle in which more anxiety is experienced, followed by more hostility, etc. Unresolved, these psychological processes leave the child feeling not only basic anxiety, but also basic hostility (Horney, 1937; May,
In order to deal with this basic anxiety and basic hostility, Horney proposed both interpersonal and intrapsychic strategies of defense (which we will examine in the next two sections). First, however, let’s take a brief, closer look at Horney’s views on culture and anxiety.

A neurotic individual, simply put, is someone whose anxiety levels and behavior are significantly different than normal. What is normal, of course, can only be defined within a cultural context. Horney cited a number of famous anthropologists and sociologists to support this claim, including Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. She cites H. Scudder Mekeel’s somewhat famous example of Native Americans having high regard for individuals who have visions and hallucinations, since those visions are considered to be special gifts, indeed blessings, from the spirits. This is in sharp contrast to the standard Western view, which considers hallucinations to be a symptom of psychosis. And yet, Native Americans are not fundamentally different than Westerners. Only one year after Horney’s book was published, Mekeel led Erik Erikson on the first of Erikson’s studies of Native American development, which led Erikson to conclude that his stages of psychosocial crisis were valid, since they seemed to apply to Europeans, European-Americans, and Native Americans. After citing many such examples, from simple matters such as preferred foods to complex matters such as attitudes toward murder, Horney concluded that every aspect of human life, including personality, was intimately tied to cultural factors:

It is no longer valid to suppose that a new psychological finding reveals a universal trend inherent in human nature…This in turn means that if we know the cultural conditions under which we live we have a good chance of gaining a much deeper understanding of the special character of normal feelings and attitudes. (pg. 19; Horney, 1937)

This emphasis on culture, however, should not be confused with the importance of individuality. Anxieties and neurotic symptoms exist within individuals, and present themselves within personal relationships. Culture, once again, merely guides the nature or form of those anxieties. In Western culture, we are driven primarily by economic and individual competition. Thus, other people are seen as competitors, or rivals. For one person to gain something, another must lose. As a result, according to Horney, there is a diffuse hostile tension pervading all of our relationships. For those who cannot resolve this tension, most likely due to having experienced the culturally determined anxieties in exaggerated form during a dysfunctional childhood, they become neurotic. Accordingly, Horney described the neurotic individual as “a stepchild of our culture” (Horney, 1937).

Interpersonal Strategies of Defense

Horney considered inner conflicts, and the personality disturbances they cause, to be the source of all psychological illness. In other words, calm, well-balanced individuals do not suffer psychological disorders (consider the stress-diathesis model of abnormal psychology). Although Freud approached this concept in his work, it was those who followed him, such as Franz Alexander, Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich, and Harald Schultz-Nencke, who defined it more clearly. Still, Horney felt they all failed to understand the precise nature and dynamics of character structure, because they did not take into account the cultural influences. It was only during her own work on feminine psychology that Horney came to the full understanding of these psychodynamic processes (at least, in her own view; Horney, 1945).

At the core of these conflicts is a basic conflict, which Freud described as being between one’s desire for immediate and total satisfaction (the id) and the forbidding environment, such as the parents and society (the superego). Horney generally agreed with Freud on this concept, but she did not consider the basic conflict to be basic. Rather, she
considered it an essential aspect of only the neurotic personality. Thus, it is a basic conflict in the neurotic individual, one which expresses itself in the person’s predominant style of relating to others. The three general attitudes that arise as neurotic attempts to solve conflict are known as **moving toward people**, **moving against people**, and **moving away from people** (Horney, 1945). Although they provide a way for neurotics to attempt solutions in their disturbed interpersonal relationships, they achieve only an artificial balance, which creates new conflicts. These new conflicts create greater hostility, anxiety, and alienation, thus continuing a vicious circle, which Horney believed could be broken by psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis is important for understanding neurotic individuals in part because they build a defensive structure around their basic conflict. Their behavior, according to Horney, reflects more of their efforts to solve conflicts, rather than the basic conflict itself. Thus, the basic conflict becomes so deeply embedded in the personality, that it can never be seen in its pure form. Nonetheless, when one of the basic character attitudes becomes predominant, we can observe characteristic behaviors that reflect the neurotic failure to resolve one’s inner conflicts.

Moving toward people, also known as the **compliant personality**, incorporates needs for affection and approval, and a special need for a partner who will fulfill all of one’s expectations of life. These needs are characteristic of neurotic trends: they are compulsive, indiscriminate, and they generate anxiety when they are frustrated. In addition, they operate independently of one’s feelings toward or value of the person who is the object of those needs (Horney, 1945). In order to ensure the continued support of others, the compliant individual will do almost anything to maintain relationships, but they give themselves over so completely that they may enjoy nothing for themselves. They begin to feel weak and helpless, and they subordinate themselves to others, thinking that everyone is smarter, more attractive, and more worthwhile than they are. They rate themselves by the opinions of others, so much so that any rejection can be catastrophic. Love becomes the most compulsive desire, but their lack of self-esteem makes true love difficult. Accordingly, sexual relations become a substitute for love, as well as the “evidence” that they are loved and desired.

Just as the compliant type clings to the belief that people are “nice,” and is continually baffled by evidence to the contrary, so the aggressive type takes it for granted that everyone is hostile, and refuses to admit that they are not. To him life is a struggle of all against all, and the devil take the hindmost. (pg. 63; Horney, 1945)

As noted in the preceding quote, those who move against people, the **aggressive personality**, are driven by a need to control others. They view the world in a Darwinian sense, a world dominated by survival of the fittest, where the strong annihilate the weak. The aggressive person may seem polite and fair-minded, but it is mostly a front, put up in order to facilitate their own goals. They may be openly aggressive, or they may choose to manipulate others indirectly, sometimes preferring to be the power behind the throne. Love, which is such a desperate need for the compliant person, is of little consequence for the aggressive person. They may very well be “in love,” and they may marry, but they are more concerned in what they can get out of the relationship. They tend to choose mates for their attractiveness, prestige, or wealth. What is most important is how their mate can enhance their own social position. They are keen competitors, looking for any evidence of weakness or ambition in others. Unfortunately, they also tend to suppress emotion in their lives, making it difficult, if not impossible, to enjoy life.

Those who move away from people, the **detached personality**, are not merely seeking meaningful solitude. Instead, they are driven to avoid other people because of the unbearable strain of associating with others. In addition, they are estranged from themselves, they do not know who they are, or what they love, desire, value, or believe. Horney described them as zombies, able to work and function like living people, but there is no life in them. A crucial element...
appears to be their desire to put emotional distance between themselves and others. They become very self-sufficient and private. Since these individuals seek negative goals, not to be involved, not to need help, not to be bothered, as opposed to having clear goals (needing a loving partner or needing to control others) their behavior is more subject to variability, but the focus remains on being detached from others in order to avoid facing the conflicts within their psyche (Horney, 1945).

Each of these three character attitudes has within it some value. It is important and healthy to maintain relationships with others (moving toward), ambition and a drive to excel have definite benefits in many cultures (moving against), and peaceful solitude, a chance to get away from it all, can be very refreshing (moving away). The healthy individual is likely able to make use of each of these solutions in the appropriate situations. When someone needs our help, we reach out to them. If someone tries to take advantage of us, we stand up for ourselves. When the daily hassles of life wear us down, we retreat into solitude for a short time, maybe exercising, going to a movie, or listening to our favorite music. As Horney attempted to make very clear, the neurotic individual is marked by a compulsion to use one style of relating to others, and they do so to their own detriment.

connections across cultures

Cultural Differences in Interpersonal Relationship Styles

As Horney repeatedly pointed out, neurotic behavior can only be viewed as such within a cultural context. Thus, in the competitive and individualistic Western world, our cultural tendencies are likely to favor moving against and moving away from others. The same is not true in many other cultures.

Relationships can exist in two basic styles: exchange or communal relationships. Exchange relationships are based on the expectation of some return on one’s investment in the relationship. Communal relationships, in contrast, occur when one person feels responsible for the well-being of the other person(s). In African and African-American cultures we are much more likely to find communal relationships, and interpersonal relationships are considered to be a core value amongst people of African descent (Belgrave & Allison, 2006). While there may be a tendency in Western culture to consider this dependence on others as somehow “weak,” it provides a source of emotional attachment, need fulfillment, and the influence and involvement of people in each other's activities and lives.

Cultural differences also come into play in love and marriage. In America, passionate love tends to be favored, whereas in China companionate love is favored. African cultures seem to fall somewhere in between (Belgrave & Allison, 2006). When considering the divorce rate in America, as compared to many other countries, it has been suggested that Americans marry the person they love, whereas people in many other cultures love the person they marry. In a study involving people from India, Pakistan, Thailand, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Australia, England, and the United States, it was found that individualistic cultures placed greater importance on the role of love in choosing to get married, and also on the loss of love as sufficient justification for divorce. For
intercultural marriages, these differences are a significant, though not insurmountable, source of conflict (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004). Attempting to maintain awareness of cultural differences when relationship conflicts occur, rather than attributing the conflict to the personality of the other person, can be an important first step in resolving intercultural conflict. However, it must also be remembered that different cultures acknowledge and tolerate conflict to different extents (Brislin, 2000; Matsumoto, 1997; Okun, Fried, & Okun, 1999; for a brief discussion of intergroup dialogue and conflict resolution options, see Miller & Garran, 2008).

These cultural differences are so fundamental, that even at the level of considering basic intelligence we see the effects of these contrasting perspectives. In a study on the Kiganda culture (within the country of Uganda, in Africa), Wober (1974) found that they consider intelligence to be more externally directed than we do, and they view successful social climbing and social interaction as evidence of intelligent behavior. This matches the attitude amongst Mediterranean cultures that notable people will be devoted to a life of public service (in contrast, the word “idiot” is derived from a Greek word meaning a private man).

Thus, moving toward others would be favored much more in other cultures than it might be in the Western world. Consequently, a significant attitude and the behavior of moving toward others would be less likely to be viewed as neurotic. Such issues are, of course, very important as we interact with people of other cultures, as we may consider their behavior to be odd according to our standards. Naturally, they may be thinking the same thing about us. What is probably most important is that we learn about and experience other cultures, so that differences in customs and behavior are not surprising when they occur.

There are two other mechanisms that Horney suggested are used by people in their attempts to resolve inner conflict: the idealized image, and externalization (Horney, 1945). The idealized image is a creation of what the person believes themselves to be, or what they feel they can or ought to be. It is always flattering, and quite removed from reality. The individual may see themselves as beautiful, powerful, saintly, or a genius. Consequently, they become quite arrogant. The more unrealistic their view is, the more compulsive their need for affirmation and recognition. Since they need no confirmation of what they know to be true, they are particularly sensitive when questioned about their false claims! The idealized image is not to be confused with authentic ideals. Ideals are goals, they have a dynamic quality, they arouse incentive to achieve those goals, and they are important for personal growth and development. Having genuine ideals tends to result in humility. The idealized image, in contrast, is static, and it hinders growth by denying or condemning one’s shortcomings.

The idealized image can provide a temporary refuge from the basic conflict, but when the tension between the actual self and the idealized image becomes unbearable, there is nothing within the
self to fall back on. Consequently, an extreme attempt at a solution is to run away from the self entirely. Externalization is the tendency to experience one’s own psychodynamic processes as having occurred outside oneself, and then blaming others for one’s own problems. Such individuals become dependent on others, because they become preoccupied with changing, reforming, punishing, or impressing those individuals who are responsible for their own well-being. A particularly unfortunate consequence of externalization is a feeling Horney described as a “gnawing sense of emptiness and shallowness” (pg. 117; Horney, 1945). However, rather than allowing themselves to feel the emotion, they might experience it as an empty feeling in the stomach, and attempt to satisfy themselves by, for example, overeating. Overall, the self-contempt they feel is externalized in two basic ways: either despising others, or feeling that others despise them. Either way, it is easy to see how damaged the individual’s personal relationships would become. Horney described externalization as a process of self-elimination, which aggravates the very process with set it in motion: the conflict between the person and their environment.

**Discussion Question:** Horney described three basic attitudes regarding other people: moving toward, moving against, or moving away from them. Do you easily use all three styles of relating to others, or do you tend to rely on one more than the others? Does this create problems in your relationships?

**Intrapsychic Strategies of Defense**

In *Neurosis and Human Growth*, Horney (1950) addressed the psychodynamic struggle toward self-realization. She described a series of psychological events that occur in the development of a neurotic personality, and how they interfere with the healthy psychological growth of the real self. Indeed, neurotic symptoms arise out of the conflict between the real self, our deep source of growth, and the idealized image. She began this book with a simple statement as to why she focused so much of her work on neurotic personalities:

The neurotic process is a special form of human development, and - because of the waste of constructive energies which it involves - is a particularly unfortunate one. (pg. 13; Horney, 1950)

Horney believed in an innate potentiality within all people, which she referred to as growth toward self-realization. The real self underlies this tendency toward self-realization, but it can be diverted by the development of basic anxiety. In order to overcome basic anxiety, the child adopts one of the strategies described above, attempting to solve its conflicts by moving toward, against, or away from others. Under adverse conditions, the child adopts one of these strategies in a rigid and extreme fashion, and begins the neurotic development. And yet, the tendency toward self-realization remains deep within the psyche, demanding that the neurotic development seek some higher level. Thus, the idealized image is formed, and a variety of intrapsychic processes begin an attempt to justify oneself based upon that idealized image.

The establishment of the idealized image involves self-glorification, and it reflects a need to lift oneself above others. The psychic energy associated with self-realization is shifted toward realization of the idealized image, establishing a general drive that Horney called the search for glory (Horney, 1950). The search for glory includes several elements,
which are manifested as drives or needs. There is a need for perfection, which aims at the complete molding of the personality into the idealized self, and a drive for neurotic ambition, or striving for external success. The most damaging element of the search for glory, however, is the drive toward vindictive triumph. The aim of vindictive triumph is to put others to shame, or to defeat them, through one’s own success. Horney considered this drive to be vindictive because its motivating source is the desire to take revenge for humiliations suffered in childhood (i.e., to pay others back for the circumstances that created basic anxiety).

The elements of the search for glory are not necessarily bad. Who wouldn’t want to be perfect, ambitious, and triumphant? However, in their compulsive and neurotic form, Horney believed that people came to expect these elements, creating what she called the neurotic claims. When simple desires or needs become claims, individual feel they have a right to those things, they feel they are entitled. They fully expect to be satisfied in every way, and they also expect, indeed feel they are entitled, to never be criticized, doubted, or questioned (Horney, 1950). These claims are not only made on other people, but also on institutions, such as the workplace or society as a whole. The individual becomes highly egocentric, reminding others of a spoiled child, and they expect their needs to be satisfied without putting forth any effort of their own. Obviously, it is highly unlikely that such a person’s needs are going to be fulfilled, creating a diffuse state of frustration and discontent, so all-encompassing that Horney suggested it can actually be viewed as a character trait in the neurotic individual. From the therapist’s point of view, neurotic claims are particularly serious because they take the place of the patient’s actual personality growth. In other words, the patient believes that merely wanting or intending to change is enough, and no effort is necessary. Indeed, the claims themselves are the neurotic’s guarantee of future glory (Horney, 1950).

While these neurotic claims and the feelings of entitlement that accompany them may seem to be just a personal problem, the fact is that many people make seriously flawed self-assessments of their abilities, attributes, and future behavior. Indeed, the “average” person typically rates themselves as “above average” in many areas of their lives. These flawed self-assessments come into play in many aspects of our lives, and can easily affect others (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Williams, 2004). For example, the United States spends more of its gross domestic product on health care than any other major industrialized country, and yet many people seriously underestimate the consequences of a wide range of unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, drinking alcohol, overeating to the point of obesity, and avoiding exercise. The poor physical health of many Americans has become a regular topic in the mainstream media, as it threatens both individual lives (and, consequently, the family and friends of those who die) and our ability to fund healthcare for those who are poor or aged. In education, students dramatically overestimate the extent to which they have learned, limiting the likelihood that they will take fuller advantage of their education. And in business, the consequences can be severe for many employees, and therefore their families, when a President or CEO is so overconfident that they make poor decisions that bankrupt the company. As suggested above, these problems are common, not just confined to those who are neurotic. Thus, the problem of overconfidence, whether the result of an unreasonable trend in society to ensure everyone’s self-esteem or the result of neurotic claims, as well as the extent to which individuals are able to know themselves and, therefore, function in the real world, is critical to everyone (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Williams, 2004).

Whereas the neurotic claims are directed outward, the individual then turns their attention back into the self. They begin to tell themselves (though this may unconscious) to forget about the worthless creature they believe they are, and start behaving as they should. In order to match up with the idealized image, they should be honest, generous, and just, they should be able to endure any misfortune, they should be the perfect friend and lover, they should like everyone, they
should never feel hurt, they should never be attached to anyone or anything, they should know, understand, and foresee everything, they should be able to overcome any difficulty, etc. Obviously, no one can be everything at all times. Horney described this tragic state as the tyranny of the should. Since it is virtually impossible for anyone to maintain such discipline in their life, rather than developing real self-confidence, the neurotic individual develops a questionable alternative: neurotic pride. However, the pride is not in who the individual is, but rather in who the individual believes they should be (Horney, 1950).

Sooner or later, it is inevitable that the neurotic individual will have their pride hurt in real life. When this happens, the other side of neurotic pride comes out: self-hate. Indeed, Horney believed that pride and self-hate are a single entity, which she called the pride system. As the neurotic individual becomes more aware of their failure to live up to the idealized self, they develop self-hate and self-contempt. According to Horney, the battle lines are now drawn between the pride system and the real self. It is not the real self that is hated, however, but the emerging constructive forces of the real self (the actual aim of psychotherapy!). This conflict, between the pride system and the constructive forces for change inherent in the real self, are so profound, that Horney named it the central inner conflict! In her earlier writings, Horney used the term neurotic conflict to refer to conflicts between incompatible compulsive drives. The central inner conflict is unique, in that it sets up a conflict between a neurotic drive (the pride system) and a healthy drive (the trend toward self-realization). Horney believed that individuals who have arrived at this psychological state of affairs were indeed in a difficult situation:

Surveying self-hate and its ravaging force, we cannot help but see in it a great tragedy, perhaps the greatest tragedy of the human mind. Man in reaching out for the Infinite and Absolute also starts destroying himself. When he makes a pact with the devil, who promises him glory, he has to go to hell - to the hell within himself. (pg. 154; Horney, 1950).

Discussion Question: Horney defined the central inner conflict as the battle between the constructive forces for change inherent in the real self and the self-hate that arises out of the pride system. Have you ever found yourself giving up on something important because you feel incapable, unworthy, or overly self-critical? If you have ever been aware of these feelings at the time they occurred, what, if anything, did you do about them?

Horney’s Challenge for Psychoanalysis

One of the actions that made Horney most controversial was her willingness to challenge how psychoanalysis should be conducted with patients. In New Ways in Psychoanalysis (Horney, 1939), Horney made it very clear why she thought that psychoanalysis needed to be questioned:

My desire to make a critical re-evaluation of psychoanalytical theories had its origin in a dissatisfaction with therapeutic results. (pg. 7; Horney, 1939)

Simply put, she had asked many leading psychoanalysts questions about problems in treating her patients, and none of them could offer meaningful answers (at least, they had no meaning for Horney). In addition, a few of them, such as Wilhelm Reich, encouraged her to question orthodox psychoanalytic theory. As always, Horney did not see this as a rejection of Freud. Indeed, she felt that as she pursued new ideas, she found stronger reasons to admire the foundation that Freud had established. More importantly, she was upset that those who criticized psychoanalysis often simply ignored it, rather than looking more deeply into the valuable insights she believed it still had to offer for any therapist. As before, she saved her most serious critiques for the study of feminine psychology, though she still considered...
psychoanalysis with an emphasis on culture to be a valid therapeutic approach:

The American woman is different from the German woman; both are different from certain Pueblo Indian women. The New York society woman is different from the farmer’s wife in Idaho. The way specific cultural conditions engender specific qualities and faculties, in women as in men - this is what we may hope to understand. (pg. 119; Horney, 1939)

In her second book on therapy, Horney proposed something quite radical: the possibility of Self-Analysis (Horney, 1942). She considered self-analysis important for two main reasons. First, psychoanalysis was an important means of personal development, though not the only means. In this assertion, she was both emphasizing the value of psychoanalysis for many people, while at the same time saying that it wasn’t so important that it had to conducted in the orthodox manner by an extensively trained psychoanalyst, since there are many paths to self-development (e.g., good friends and a meaningful career). Second, even if many people sought traditional psychoanalysis, there simply aren’t enough psychoanalysts to go around. So, Horney provided a book to help those willing to pursue their own self-analysis, even if they do so only occasionally (which she believed could be quite effective for specific issues). She did not suggest that self-analysis was by any means easy, but more important was the realization that it was possible. With regard to the possible criticism that self-analysts might not finish the job, that they might not delve into the darkest and most repressed areas of their psyche, she simply suggested that no analysis is ever complete. What matters more than being successful is the desire to continue (Horney, 1942).

When the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis was established, an important part of their mission was community education. One of the courses was entitled Are You Considering Psychoanalysis? This course was so popular, that the instructors decided to publish a book by the same name, and Horney was chosen the editor-in-chief (Horney, 1946). The chapters present very practical topics, such as: What Are Your Doubts About Psychoanalysis? (Kelman, 1946); What Do You Do in Analysis? (Kilpatrick, 1946); and How Does Analysis Help? (Ivimey, 1946). Perhaps reflecting her own concerns about the ability of psychoanalysis to “cure” a person’s problems, Horney entitled the final chapter, which she wrote herself: How Do You Progress After Analysis? She begins the chapter by addressing the concern that many of her patients had: why would a person need more progress after psychoanalysis? Isn’t psychoanalysis supposed to resolve all of a person’s psychological problems? As noted above, however, Horney felt that no analysis is ever complete. But this time the reasoning is not based on questioning the effectiveness of psychoanalysis itself. Rather, it is based on the potential for human growth, a potential that is boundless:

Your growth as a human being, however, is a process that can and should go on as long as you live…analytical therapy merely sets this process in motion… (pg. 236; Horney, 1946)

Discussion Question: Have you ever tried self-analysis, in either a formal or an informal way? If yes, were your efforts based on any personal experience or knowledge, and did it prove to be helpful?