Horney & Humanistic Psychoanalysis

Major Concepts

Since Horney's thought went through three phases, it will be best to discuss the major concepts of each phase separately. We shall look first at her ideas about feminine psychology, then at the new psychoanalytic paradigm she developed in the 1930s, and finally at her mature theory.

Feminine Psychology

Nancy Chodorow locates the "political and theoretical origins" of psychoanalytic feminism with Karen Horney, whose theories form the basis "for most of the recent revisions of psychoanalytic understandings of gender and for most psychoanalytic dissidence on the question of gender in the early period as well" (1989, pp. 2-3). Horney's ideas were ignored for many years but now seem remarkably astute.

The Male View of Women

In her earliest essays on feminine psychology, Horney strove to show that girls and women 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 and presumed inferiority to men. 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.

An important question for Horney is why men see women as they do. She contended that male envy of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood, and of the breasts and suckling, gives rise to an unconscious tendency to devalue women and that men's impulse toward creative work is an overcompensation for their small role in procreation. The "womb-envy" of the male must be stronger than the so-called "penis-envy" of the female, since men need to depreciate women more than women need to depreciate men.

In later essays, Horney continued to analyze the male view of woman in order to expose its lack of scientific foundation. In "The Distrust between the Sexes" (1931), she argued that woman is seen as "a second-rate being" because "at any given time, the more powerful side will create an ideology suitable to help maintain its position. . . . In this ideology the differentness of the weaker one will be interpreted as inferiority, and it will be proven that these differences are unchangeable, basic, or God's will" (Horney, 1967, p. 116). In "The Dread of Woman" (1932), Horney traced the male dread of woman to the boy's fear that his genital is inadequate in relation to the mother. The threat of woman is not castration but humiliation; the threat is to his masculine self-regard. As he grows up, the male continues to have a deeply hidden anxiety about the size of his penis or his potency, an anxiety that has no counterpart for the female, who "performs her part by merely being" (Horney, 1967, p. 145) and is not obliged to go on proving her womanhood. There is, therefore, no corresponding female dread of...
men. The male deals with his anxiety by erecting an ideal of efficiency, by seeking sexual conquests, and by debasing the love object.

Cultural Factors

In her essays on feminine psychology, Horney moved steadily away from Freud's belief that anatomy is destiny and toward a greater emphasis on cultural factors as a source of women's problems and of gender identity. She acknowledged that little girls envy the male plumbing but regarded this as psychologically insignificant. What women chiefly envy is male privilege, and what they need is greater opportunity to develop their human capacities. The patriarchal ideal of woman does not necessarily correspond to her inherent character, but the cultural power of that ideal often makes women behave in accordance with it.

In "The Problem of Feminine Masochism" (1935), Horney challenged the idea that "masochistic trends are inherent in, or akin to, the very essence of female nature" (Horney, 1967, p. 214). This is the position of psychoanalysis, which reflects the stereotypes of male culture, but Horney identified a number of social conditions that have made women more masochistic than men. Moreover, comparative studies show that these conditions have not been universal and that some societies have been more unfavorable to women's development than others.

The Masculinity Complex

Horney did not deny that women often envy men and are uncomfortable with their feminine role. Indeed, many of her essays deal with the "masculinity complex" (similar to Adler's "masculine protest"), which she defined as "the entire complex of feelings and fantasies that have for their content the woman's feeling of being discriminated against, her envy of the male, her wish to be a man and to discard the female role" (Horney, 1967, p. 74). Although she initially argued that women are bound to have a masculinity complex because of their need to escape the guilt and anxiety that result from their oedipal situation, Horney soon came to feel that the masculinity complex is not inevitable but is the product of a male dominated culture and of particular kinds of family dynamics. The fact that "a girl is exposed from birth onward to the suggestion -- inevitable, whether conveyed brutally or delicately -- of her inferiority" is an experience "that constantly stimulates her masculinity complex (Horney, 1967, p. 69).

In discussing family dynamics, Horney focused at first on the girl's relationship with male members of the family, but later she derived the masculinity complex and all the phenomena traditionally associated with penis envy -- such as feelings of inferiority, vindictiveness, and competitiveness toward men -- from the girl's relationship with females in the family, particularly the mother. In "Maternal Conflicts" (1933), she brought together the separate features of childhood to which she had attributed the masculinity complex in previous essays: "A girl may have reasons to acquire a dislike for her own female world very early, perhaps because her mother has intimidated her, or she has experienced a thoroughly disillusioning disappointment from the side of the father or brother; she may have had early sexual experiences that frightened her; or she may have found that her brother was greatly preferred to herself" (Horney, 1967, p. 179). All of these features were present in Karen Horney's childhood.

The Overvaluation of Love

"The Overvaluation of Love" (1934) is the culmination of Horney's attempt to analyze herself in terms of feminine psychology. The essay draws on the cases of seven women whose family histories, symptoms, and social backgrounds are similar to Horney's, and she may well have included herself in her clinical sample. Most of the essay is devoted to trying to explain why these women have an
obsessive need for a male but are unable to form satisfactory relationships. Their obsession is traced to a childhood situation in which each "had come off second best in the competition for a man" (Horney, 1967, p. 193). It is the typical fate of the girl to be frustrated in her love for her father, but for these women the consequences are unusually severe because of the presence of a mother or sister who dominates the situation erotically.

The girl responds to her sense of defeat either by withdrawing from the competition for a male or developing a compulsive rivalry with other women in which she tries to demonstrate her erotic appeal. The conquest of men provides not only what Horney would later call a "vindictive triumph" but is also a way of coping with anxiety and self-hate. The insecure girl develops an anxiety about being abnormal that often manifests itself as a fear that something is wrong with her genitals or that she is ugly and cannot possibly be attractive to men. As a defense, she may pay an inordinate amount of attention to her appearance or may wish to be a male. The most important defense is proving that, despite her disadvantages, she can attract a man. To be without a man is a disgrace, but having one proves that she is "normal": "Hence the frantic pursuit" (Horney, 1967, pp. 197-98).

The situation of these women is sad because although their relationships with men are paramount, they are never satisfactory. They tend to lose interest in a man as soon as he is conquered because they have "a profound fear of the disappointments and humiliations that they expect to result from falling in love" (Horney, 1967, p. 205). Having been rejected by father or brother in childhood, they simultaneously need to prove their worth through erotic conquests and to make themselves invulnerable by avoiding deep emotional bonds. They tend to change partners frequently, since after securing a man they need to get out of the relationship before they get hurt. However attractive they are, they do not believe that a man can actually love them. Moreover, they have a "deep-seated desire for revenge" because of their original defeat: "the desire is to get the better of a man, to cast him aside, to reject him just as she herself once felt cast aside and rejected" (Horney, 1967, p. 206).

Gender Neutrality

Although Horney had devoted most of her professional life to writing about feminine psychology, she abandoned the topic in 1935 because she felt that the role of culture in shaping the female psyche makes it impossible to determine what is distinctively feminine. In a lecture entitled "Woman's Fear of Action" (1935), she argued that only when women have been freed from the conceptions of femininity fostered by male dominated cultures can we discover how they really differ from men psychologically. Our primary objective must not be to identify what is essentially feminine but to foster "the full development of the human personalities of all" (Paris, 1994, p. 238). After this, she began to develop a theory that she considered to be gender-neutral, one that applied equally to males and females.