Horney & Humanistic Psychoanalysis

Major Concepts (continued)

Horney's New Paradigm

In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937) and *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939), Horney subjected Freud's theories to a systematic critique and began to develop her own version of psychoanalysis. Its distinguishing features were a greater emphasis on culture, a conception of neurosis as a set of defenses devised to cope with basic anxiety, and a focus on present character structure rather than infantile origins.

The Role of Culture

Horney argued that because of his overemphasis on the biological sources of human behavior, Freud had incorrectly assumed the universality of the feelings, attitudes, and kinds of relationships that were common in his culture. Not recognizing the importance of social factors, he attributed neurotic egocentricity to a narcissistic libido, hostility to a destruction instinct, an obsession with money to an anal libido, and acquisitiveness to orality. But anthropology shows that cultures vary widely in their tendency to generate these characteristics, and the Oedipus complex as well, and Horney's own experience of cultural difference after she moved to the United States confirmed this point of view.

Horney rejected Freud's derivation of neurosis from the clash between culture and instinct. In Freud's view, we must have culture in order to survive, and we must repress or sublimate our instincts in order to have culture. Horney did not believe that collision between the individual and society is inevitable but rather that it occurs when a bad environment frustrates our emotional needs and inspires fear and hostility. Freud depicts human beings as inherently insatiable, destructive, and anti-social, but according to Horney these not expressions of instinct but neurotic responses to adverse conditions.

The Structure of Neurosis

Horney did not reject the significance of childhood in emotional development, as is sometimes thought, but she emphasized pathogenic conditions in the family that make children feel unsafe, unloved, and unvalued rather than the frustration of libidinal desires. As a result of these conditions, children develop "basic anxiety," a feeling of being helpless in a potentially hostile world, which they try to reduce by adopting such strategies of defense as the pursuit of love, power, or detachment.

Horney felt that these defensive strategies are doomed to failure because they generate "vicious circles" in which the means employed to allay anxiety tend to increase it. For example, the frustration of the need for love makes that need insatiable, and the demandingness and jealousy that follow make it less likely than ever that the person will receive affection. People who have not been loved develop a feeling of being unlovable that leads them to discount any evidence to the contrary. Being deprived of affection
has made them dependent on others, but they are afraid of that dependency because it makes them too vulnerable. Horney compared the situation created in this way to that "of a person who is starving for food yet does not dare to take any for fear that it might be poisoned" (Horney, 1937, p. 114).

Although Horney devoted much of The Neurotic Personality of Our Time (1939) to the neurotic need for love, she gave a good deal of space to the quest for power, prestige, and possession that develops when a person feels hopeless about gaining affection. She also discussed detachment and some of the intrapsychic strategies of defense, such as guilt, neurotic suffering, and self-inflation. She was to examine these in much greater detail in later books.

Horney's paradigm for the structure of neurosis is one in which disturbances in human relationships generate a basic anxiety that leads to the development of strategies of defense that are not only self-defeating but are in conflict with each other, since people adopt not just one but several of them. This paradigm formed the basis of Horney's mature theory.

Structure versus Genesis

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Horney's new version of psychoanalysis was her shift in emphasis, both in theory and clinical practice, from the past to the present. She replaced Freud's focus on genesis with a structural approach, arguing that psychoanalysis should be less concerned with infantile origins than with the current constellation of defenses and inner conflicts. This feature of her theory sharply differentiated it from classical psychoanalysis, which seeks to explain the present to trying to recover the past.

In New Ways in Psychoanalysis (1939), Horney distinguished between her own "evolutionistic" thinking and what she called Freud's "mechanistic-evolutionistic" thought. Evolutionistic thinking presupposes "that things which exist today have not existed in the same form from the very beginning, but have developed out of previous stages. These preceding stages may have little resemblance to the present forms, but the present forms would be unthinkable without the preceding ones." Mechanistic-evolutionistic thinking holds that "nothing really new is created in the process of development," that "what we see today is only the old in a changed form" (Horney, 1939, p. 42). For Horney, the profound influence of early experiences does not preclude continued development, whereas for Freud nothing much new happens after the age of five, and later reactions or experiences are to be considered as a repetition of earlier ones.

At the heart of Freud's conception of the relation between childhood experiences and the behavior of the adult is the doctrine of the timelessness of the unconscious. Fears and desires, or entire experiences, that are repressed in childhood remain uninfluenced by further experiences or growth. This gives rise to the concept of fixation, which may pertain to a person in the early environment, such as father or mother, or to a stage of libidinal development. Because of the concept of fixation, it is possible to regard later attachments or other behaviors as repetitions of the past, which has remained encapsulated and unchanged in the unconscious.

Horney did not attempt to refute the doctrine of the timelessness of the unconscious, or the cluster of concepts related to it, but rather built her own theory on a different set of premises. The "non-mechanistic viewpoint is that in organic development there can never be a simple repetition or regression to former stages" (Horney, 1939, p. 44). The past is always contained in the present, but through a developmental process rather than through repetition. The way in which lives "really develop," said Horney, is that "each step condition[s] the next one." Thus "interpretations which connect the present difficulties immediately with influences in childhood are scientifically only half truths and practically useless" (Horney, 1935, pp. 404-405).
Horney's model is one in which early experiences profoundly affect us not by producing fixations that cause us to repeat earlier patterns but by conditioning the ways in which we respond to the world. These in turn are influenced by subsequent experiences and eventually evolve into our adult defensive strategies and character structures. Early experiences may have a greater impact than later ones because they determine the direction of development, but the character of the adult is the evolved product of all previous interactions between psychic structure and environment.

Another important difference between Horney and Freud is that whereas for Freud the determining experiences in childhood are relatively few in number and mostly of a sexual nature, for Horney the sum total of childhood experiences is responsible for neurotic development. Things go wrong because of all the things in the culture, in the relations with peers, and especially in the family that make the child feel unsafe, unloved, and unvalued and that give rise to basic anxiety. This anxiety leads to the development of defensive strategies that form a neurotic character structure, and it is this character structure from which later difficulties emanate. Horney sees sexual difficulties as the result rather than the cause of personality problems.

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