

An Early Feminist on Safety and Satisfaction

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Last week I was giving a lecture on the social psychology of safety and satisfaction. A young student approached me saying that she was preparing a dissertation on the legacy of Karen Horney. The very energetic student asked me if I could write something about this interesting analyst. So good friend, here it is.

Karen Horney was born in Germany. In 1926, she immigrated to the United States working first in Chicago and then settling permanently in New York. During these years, she developed most of her framework. Her main thesis is that human beings have the capacity as well as the desire to develop their potentialities and become decent people... She made the strong point that people can change and go on changing as long as they live.

This great psychologist was trained profoundly in the official psychoanalytic mode, but she departed from the orthodox point of view. She quickly took issue with the psychological portrayal of women. As an early feminist, she argued that psychoanalysis focused more on the development of men than women. Countering Freud's contention that women are driven by envy of the male organ, she made the case that men are envious of women for their ability to carry and give birth to children.

Horney became a social psychologist placing heavy emphasis on social relationships (pivotal factors in the development of human beings). She theorized that the center of human development is not sex, or aggression but the need for and the efforts to obtain security. Her view of human nature is optimistic, making the core argument that people can manage and overcome their anxieties; in addition, they can grow and develop to the fullest of their potential. For decades, I have been researching and lecturing on the psychology of human potential, and indeed Karen Horney was one of the pioneers of this paradigm.

Karen Horney stressed the early years of childhood in shaping the behavioral patterns of adulthood. She also pointed out that social forces were

the mayor determinants in later behaviors of human beings. There are neither universal stages of development, nor inevitable childhood conflicts! Rather, the social relationship between a child and his/her parents is the key factor.

One of her main beliefs was that childhood is characterized by two needs: safety and satisfaction. These are drives of universal nature and are extremely important. However, she placed much greater emphasis on safety than on satisfaction. What is imperative, primary and decisive in determining later adult behavior? Well, it is the need for safety, meaning security and freedom from fear. Whether or not the infant experiences a feeling of security and an absence of fear determines the existence of the stability of the future human condition. The child's security depends entirely on the treatment he or she receives from the parents. The major way in which parents can foster security is to display sustained warmth and affection for the child. Children can cope with much of what is usually considered traumatic, as long as they feel wanted and loved and are therefore secure. Horney believed that a child knows if the parents' love is genuine and is not easily fooled by false demonstration and expressions of love.

For several reasons, hostility thus endangered in the child may be repressed. This involves a sense of helplessness, fear of the parents, and need for expressions of love and guilt feelings.

She highlighted the helplessness aspect of the infant. Whether or not the child feels helpless depends on how the parents treat him/her. If the child is excessively sheltered, babied and kept in a state of dependency, then helplessness will be encouraged. The more helplessness the child feels, the less he/ she will dare to oppose or rebel against the parents in any way. This means that any feelings of hostility will be repressed.

A child can easily be made to be fearful of his or her parents through heavy punishments, threats, or beating. The child can be made apprehensive and fearful about germs, moving cars, dogs, strangers or other children by observing what the parents say and do in regard to these things.

The three main factors (helplessness, fear and superficial love) can cause the child to repress his/her hostility in order to avoid damaging the relationship with the parents. The repressed resentment manifests itself in the condition of basic anxiety. She defined it as an insidiously increase, all

pervading feeling of being lonely and helpless in a hostile world. Basic anxiety is the foundation on which later neuroses develop, and it is tied to the feeling of hostility.

Horney drew an analogy between a person suffering basic anxiety and a nation undergoing political unrest. The same can be said about an organization... If a person feels small, insignificant, helpless, deserted, and endangered, and thinks that he/she is in a world or reality that is out to abuse, cheat, attack, humiliate or betray, then he/she is in a condition that is fertile for unstable behaviors.

In our culture, there are four means for self-protection:

1. Gaining affection
2. Being submissive
3. Attaining power
4. Withdrawing

In securing affection and love from other people, the person is saying, in effect “If you love me, you will not hurt me.” Submissiveness involves complying with the wishes of others. It is like saying, “If I give in, I will not be hurt.” Achieving power over others is about compensating for his/her sense of helplessness and gaining security through the achievement of success. The belief is that “If I have power, no one can hurt me.” The psychological withdrawal is about becoming completely independent of others, not relying on anyone for the satisfaction of external or internal needs.

Karen Horney’s philosophy of optimism is that human beings have the sustained urge to grow and are unhappy if they don’t!

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