

THE
NEUROTIC PERSONALITY
OF OUR TIME

BY
DR. KAREN HORNEY



Franklin Watts, Inc.

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70 Fifth Avenue New York

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· INTRODUCTION ·

THE purpose I have had in mind in writing this book has been to give an accurate picture of the neurotic person who lives among us, with the conflicts which actually move him, with his anxieties, his suffering and the many difficulties he has in his relations with others as well as with himself. I am not concerned here with any particular type or types of neuroses, but have concentrated on the character structure which recurs in nearly all neurotic persons of our time in one or another form.

Emphasis is put on the actually existing conflicts and the neurotic's attempts to solve them, on his actually existing anxieties and the defenses he has built up against them. This emphasis on the actual situation does not mean that I discard the idea that essentially neuroses develop out of early childhood experiences. But I differ from many psychoanalytic writers inasmuch as I do not consider it justified to focus our attention on childhood in a sort of one-sided fascination and to consider later reactions essentially as repetitions of earlier ones. I want to show that the relation between childhood experiences and later conflicts is much more in-

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tricate than is assumed by those psychoanalysts who proclaim a simple cause and effect relationship. Though experiences in childhood provide determining conditions for neuroses they are nevertheless not the only cause of later difficulties.

When we focus our attention on the actual neurotic difficulties we recognize that neuroses are generated not only by incidental individual experiences, but also by the specific cultural conditions under which we live. In fact the cultural conditions not only lend weight and color to the individual experiences but in the last analysis determine their particular form. It is an individual fate, for example, to have a domineering or a "self-sacrificing" mother, but it is only under definite cultural conditions that we find domineering or self-sacrificing mothers, and it is also only because of these existing conditions that such an experience will have an influence on later life.

When we realize the great import of cultural conditions on neuroses the biological and physiological conditions, which are considered by Freud to be their root, recede into the background. The influence of these latter factors should be considered only on the basis of well established evidence.

This orientation of mine has led to some new interpretations for a number of basic problems in neuroses. Though these interpretations refer to disparate questions such as the problem of masochism, the implica-

tions of the neurotic need for affection, the meaning of neurotic guilt feelings, they all have a common basis in an emphasis on the determining role that anxiety plays in bringing about neurotic character trends.

Since many of my interpretations deviate from those of Freud some readers may ask whether this is still psychoanalysis. The answer depends on what one holds essential in psychoanalysis. If one believes that it is constituted entirely by the sum total of theories propounded by Freud, then what is presented here is not psychoanalysis. If, however, one believes that the essentials of psychoanalysis lie in certain basic trends of thought concerning the role of unconscious processes and the ways in which they find expression, and in a form of therapeutic treatment that brings these processes to awareness, then what I present is psychoanalysis. I believe that a strict adherence to all of Freud's theoretical interpretations entails the danger of tending to find in neuroses what Freud's theories lead one to expect to find. It is the danger of stagnation. I believe that deference for Freud's gigantic achievements should show itself in building on the foundations that he has laid, and that in this way we can help to fulfill the possibilities which psychoanalysis has for the future, as a theory as well as a therapy.

These remarks answer also another possible question: whether my interpretation is somewhat Adlerian. There are some similarities with certain points that Adler has

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stressed, but fundamentally my interpretation rests on Freudian ground. Adler is in fact a good example of how even a productive insight into psychological processes can become sterile if pursued onesidedly and without foundation in the basic discoveries of Freud.

Since it has not been the main purpose of this book to define in what respects I agree or disagree with other psychoanalytic writers, I have on the whole limited my discussion of polemic points to certain questions on which my opinions conspicuously diverge from those of Freud.

What I have presented here are the impressions I have gained in long psychoanalytic study of neuroses. To present the material on which my interpretations are based I should have had to include many detailed case histories, a procedure which would have been unduly cumbersome in a book intended to give a general presentation of problems in neuroses. Even without this material, however, it is possible for the specialist and even for the layman to test the validity of my statements. If he is an attentive observer he can compare my assumptions with his own observations and experience, and on this basis reject or accept, modify or underscore what I have said.

The book is written in plain language, and for the sake of clarity I have refrained from discussing too many ramifications. Technical terms have been avoided as much as possible because there is always the danger of

letting such terms substitute for clear thinking. Thus it may appear to many readers, particularly laymen, that the problems of the neurotic personality are easily understood. But this would be a mistaken and even a dangerous conclusion. We cannot escape the fact that all psychological problems are necessarily profoundly intricate and subtle. If there is anyone who is not willing to accept this fact he is warned not to read the book lest he find himself in a maze and be disappointed in his search for ready formulae.

The book is addressed to the interested layman as well as to those who have to deal professionally with neurotic persons and are familiar with the problems involved. Among these it is intended not only for psychiatrists but for social workers and teachers, and also for those groups of anthropologists and sociologists who have become aware of the significance of psychic factors in the study of different cultures. Finally, I hope it will have some significance for the neurotic himself. If he does not on principle refute any psychological thinking as an intrusion and an imposition he often has on the basis of his own suffering a keener and finer understanding of psychological intricacies than his more robust brothers. Unfortunately reading about his situation will not cure him; in what he reads he may recognize others much more readily than himself.

I take this opportunity to express my thanks to Miss Elizabeth Todd, who has edited the book. The writers

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to whom I feel indebted are mentioned in the text. My main gratitude goes to Freud because he has provided us with the foundation and the tools to work with, and to my patients because whatever understanding I have has grown out of our work together.

• CHAPTER 1 •

Cultural and Psychological Implications of Neuroses

WE USE the term "neurotic" quite freely today without always having, however, a clear conception of what it denotes. Often it is hardly more than a slightly high-brow way of expressing disapproval: one who formerly would have been content to say lazy, sensitive, demanding or suspicious, is now likely to say instead "neurotic." Yet we do have something in mind when we use the term, and without being quite aware of it we apply certain criteria to determine its choice.

First of all, neurotic persons are different from the average individuals in their reactions. We should be inclined to consider neurotic, for example, a girl who prefers to remain in the rank and file, refuses to accept an increased salary and does not wish to be identified with her superiors, or an artist who earns thirty dollars a week but could earn more if he gave more time to his work, and who prefers instead to enjoy life as well as he can on that amount, to spend a good deal of his time in the company of women or in indulging in technical hobbies. The reason we should call such persons neurotic is that most of us are familiar, and exclusively familiar,

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with a behavior pattern that implies wanting to get ahead in the world, to get ahead of others, to earn more money than the bare minimum for existence.

These examples show that one criterion we apply in designating a person as neurotic is whether his mode of living coincides with any of the recognized behavior patterns of our time. If the girl without competitive drives, or at least without apparent competitive drives, lived in some Pueblo Indian culture, she would be considered entirely normal, or if the artist lived in a village in Southern Italy or in Mexico he, too, would be considered normal, because in those environments it is inconceivable that anyone should want to earn more money or to make any greater effort than is absolutely necessary to satisfy immediate needs. Going farther back, in Greece the attitude of wanting to work more than one's needs required would have been considered positively indecent.

Thus the term neurotic, while originally medical, cannot be used now without its cultural implications. One can diagnose a broken leg without knowing the cultural background of the patient, but one would run a great risk in calling an Indian boy¹ psychotic because he told us that he had visions in which he believed. In the particular culture of these Indians the experience of visions and hallucinations is regarded as a special gift,

¹ Cf. H. Scudder Mekeel, "Clinic and Culture" in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 30 (1935), pp. 292-300.

Cultural and Psychological Implications of Neuroses
a blessing from the spirits, and they are deliberately induced as conferring a certain prestige on the person who has them. With us a person would be neurotic or psychotic who talked by the hour with his deceased grandfather, whereas such communication with ancestors is a recognized pattern in some Indian tribes. A person who felt mortally offended if the name of a deceased relative were mentioned we should consider neurotic indeed, but he would be absolutely normal in the Jicarilla Apache culture.² A man mortally frightened by the approach of a menstruating woman we should consider neurotic, while with many primitive tribes fear concerning menstruation is the average attitude.

The conception of what is normal varies not only with the culture but also within the same culture, in the course of time. Today, for example, if a mature and independent woman were to consider herself "a fallen woman," "unworthy of the love of a decent man," because she had had sexual relationships, she would be suspected of a neurosis, at least in many circles of society. Some forty years ago this attitude of guilt would have been considered normal. The conception of normality varies also with the different classes of society. Members of the feudal class, for example, find it normal for a man to be lazy all the time, active only at hunting or warring, whereas a person of the small bourgeois class

² M. E. Opler, "An Interpretation of Ambivalence of two American Indian Tribes" in *Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 7 (1936), pp. 82-116.

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showing the same attitude would be considered decidedly abnormal. This variation is found also according to sex distinctions, as far as they exist in society, as they do in Western culture, where men and women are supposed to have different temperaments. For a woman to become obsessed with the dread of growing old as she approaches the forties is, again, "normal," while a man getting jittery about age at that period of life would be neurotic.

To some extent every educated person knows that there are variations in what is regarded as normal. We know that the Chinese eat foods different from ours; that the Eskimos have different conceptions of cleanliness; that the medicine-man has different ways of curing the sick from those used by the modern physician. That there are, however, variations not only in customs but also in drives and feelings, is less generally understood, though implicitly or explicitly it has been stated by anthropologists.³ It is one of the merits of modern anthropology, as Sapir⁴ has put it, to be always rediscovering the normal.

For good reasons every culture clings to the belief that its own feelings and drives are the one normal ex-

³ Cf. the excellent presentations of anthropological material in: Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*; Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*; A. S. Hallowell's forthcoming book, *Handbook of Psychological Leads for Ethnological Field Workers*.

⁴ Edward Sapir, "Cultural Anthropology and Psychiatry" in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 27 (1932), pp. 229-242.