



# THE NEUROTIC PERSONALITY OF OUR TIME

It may be difficult then to see that behind all the  
odd vanities, demands, hostilities, there is a human  
being who suffers.

—Karen Horney

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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 intricate 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 implications 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 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 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.

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## **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 highbrow 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, 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 boy<sup>1</sup> 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, 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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

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

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 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.<sup>1</sup> It is one of the merits of modern anthropology, as Sapir<sup>2</sup> 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 expression of "human nature,"<sup>3</sup> and psychology has not made an exception to this rule. Freud, for example, concludes from his observations that woman is more jealous than man, and then tries to account for this presumably general phenomenon on

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1 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*.

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

3 Cf. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*.

biological grounds.<sup>1</sup> Freud also seems to assume that all human beings experience guilt feelings concerning murder.<sup>2</sup> It is an indisputable fact, however, that the greatest variations exist in the attitude toward killing. As Peter Freuchen has shown,<sup>3</sup> the Eskimos do not feel that a murderer requires punishment. In many primitive tribes the injury done a family when one of its members is killed by an outsider may be repaired by presenting a substitute. In some cultures the feelings of a mother whose son has been killed can be assuaged by adopting the murderer in his

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1 In his paper "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes" Freud propounds the theory that the anatomical sexual differences inevitably lead every girl to envy a boy his possession of the penis. Later on her wish to possess a penis is transformed to a wish to possess a man as the carrier of a penis. She then begrudges other women their relations with men—more accurately, their possession of men—as she originally had begrudged the boy his possession of a penis. In making statements like these Freud is yielding to the temptation of his time: to make generalizations about human nature for the whole of mankind, though his generalization grows from the observation of only one culture zone.

The anthropologist would not query the validity of Freud's observations; he would accept them as pertaining to a certain part of the population of a certain culture at a certain time. He would query, however, the validity of Freud's generalizations by pointing out that there exist endless differences among peoples concerning their attitudes toward jealousy, that there are peoples where men are more jealous than women, others where both sexes lack individual jealousy, others where both sexes are inordinately jealous. In view of these existing differences he would refute Freud's—or in fact anyone's—endeavor to account for his observations on the basis of anatomical sexual differences. Instead he would stress the necessity of investigating differences of life conditions and their influence on the development of jealousy in men or women. For our culture, for instance, it would have to be asked whether Freud's observation, which holds true for neurotic women of our culture, applies also to normal women of this culture. This question has to be raised because frequently psychoanalysts, who have to deal day after day with neurotic persons, lose sight of the fact that normal persons, too, exist in our culture. It would also have to be asked, what are the psychological conditions that make for an enhanced jealousy or possessiveness concerning the other sex, and what are the differences in the life conditions of men and women in our culture that account for a difference in the development of jealousy.

2 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.

3 Peter Freuchen, *Arctic Adventure and Eskimo*.

place.<sup>1</sup>

Making further use of anthropological findings we must recognize that some of our conceptions about human nature are rather naive, for example the idea that competitiveness, sibling rivalry, kinship between affection and sexuality, are trends inherent in human nature. Our conception of normality is arrived at by the approval of certain standards of behavior and feeling within a certain group which imposes these standards upon its members. But the standards vary with culture, period, class and sex.

These considerations have more far-reaching implications for psychology than appears at first impression. The immediate consequence is a feeling of doubt about psychological omniscience. From resemblances between findings concerning our culture and those concerning other cultures we must not conclude that both are due to the same motivations. It is no longer valid to suppose that a new psychological finding reveals a universal trend inherent in human nature. The effect of all this is to confirm what some sociologists have repeatedly asserted: that there is no such thing as a normal psychology, which holds for all mankind.

These limitations, however, are more than compensated by the opening up of new possibilities of understanding. The essential implication of these anthropological considerations is that feelings and attitudes are to an amazingly high degree molded by the conditions under which we live, both cultural and individual, inseparably interwoven. 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. And inasmuch as neuroses are deviations from the normal pattern of behavior there is for them, too, a prospect of better understanding.

In part, taking this way means following Freud along the path that led him ultimately to present the world with a hitherto unthought-

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1 Robert Briffault, *The Mothers*.

of understanding of neuroses. While in theory Freud traced back our peculiarities to biologically-given drives he has emphatically represented the opinion—in theory and still more in practice—that we cannot understand a neurosis without a detailed knowledge of the individual's life circumstances, particularly the molding influences of affection in early childhood. Applying the same principle to the problem of normal and neurotic structures in a given culture means that we cannot understand these structures without a detailed knowledge of the influences the particular culture exerts over the individual.<sup>1</sup>

For the rest it means that we have to take a definite step beyond Freud, a step which is possible, though, only on the basis of Freud's revealing discoveries. For although in one respect he is far ahead of his own time, in another—in his over-emphasis on the biological origin of mental characteristics—Freud has remained rooted in its scientific orientations. He has assumed that the instinctual drives or object relationships that are frequent in our culture are biologically determined "human nature" or arise out of unalterable situations (biologically given "pregenital" stages, Oedipus complex).

Freud's disregard of cultural factors not only leads to false generalizations, but to a large extent blocks an understanding of the real forces which motivate our attitudes and actions. I believe that this disregard is the main reason why psychoanalysis, inasmuch as it faithfully follows

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<sup>1</sup> Many writers have recognized the importance of cultural factors as a determining influence in psychological conditions. Erich Fromm, in his paper "Zur Entstehung des Christusdogmas" in *Imago*, vol. 16 (1930), pp. 307-373, was the first in German psychoanalytic literature to present and elaborate this method of approach. Later it was taken up by others, such as Wilhelm Reich and Otto Fenichel. In the United States Harry Stack Sullivan was the first to see the necessity for psychiatry to consider cultural implications. Other American psychiatrists who have viewed the problem in this way include Adolf Meyer, William A. White (*Twentieth Century Psychiatry*), William A. Healy and Augusta Bronner (*New Light on Delinquency*). Recently some psychoanalysts, such as F. Alexander and A. Kardiner, have become interested in the cultural implications of psychological problems. Among the social scientists with this point of view cf. especially H. D. Lasswell (*World Politics and Personal Insecurity*) and John Dollard (*Criteria for the Life History*).

the theoretical paths beaten by Freud, seems in spite of its seemingly boundless potentialities to have come into a blind alley, manifesting itself in a rank growth of abstruse theories and the use of a shadowy terminology.

We have seen now that a neurosis involves deviation from the normal. This criterion is very important, though it is not sufficient. Persons may deviate from the general pattern without having a neurosis. The artist cited above, who refused to give more time than necessary to earning money, may have a neurosis or he may simply be wise in not permitting himself to be pulled into the current of competitive struggle. On the other hand, many persons may have a severe neurosis who according to surface observation are adapted to existing patterns of life. It is in such cases that the psychological or medical point of view is necessary.

Curiously enough, it is anything but easy to say what constitutes a neurosis from this point of view. At any rate, as long as we study the manifest picture alone, it is difficult to find characteristics common to all neuroses. We certainly cannot use the symptoms—such as phobias, depressions, functional physical disorders—as a criterion, because they may not be present. Inhibitions of some sort are always present, for reasons I shall discuss later, but they may be so subtle or so well disguised as to escape surface observation. The same difficulties would arise if we should judge from the manifest picture alone the disturbances in relations with other people, including the disturbances in sexual relations. These are never missing but they may be very difficult to discern. There are two characteristics, however, which one may discern in all neuroses without having an intimate knowledge of the personality structure: a certain rigidity in reaction and a discrepancy between potentialities and accomplishments.

Both characteristics need further explanation. By rigidity in reactions I mean a lack of that flexibility which enables us to react differently to different situations. The normal person, for instance, is suspicious where he senses or sees reasons for being so; a neurotic person may be

suspicious, regardless of the situation, all the time, whether he is aware of his state or not. A normal person is able to discriminate between compliments meant sincerely and those of an insincere nature; the neurotic person does not differentiate between the two or may discount them altogether, under all conditions. A normal person will be spiteful if he feels an unwarranted imposition; a neurotic may react with spite to any insinuation, even if he realizes that it is in his own interest. A normal person may be undecided, at times, in a matter important and difficult to decide; a neurotic may be undecided at all times.

Rigidity, however, is indicative of a neurosis only when it deviates from the cultural patterns. A rigid suspicion of anything new or strange is a normal pattern among a large proportion of peasants in Western civilization; and the small bourgeois' rigid emphasis on thrift is also an example of normal rigidity.

In the same way, a discrepancy between the potentialities of a person and his actual achievements in life may be due only to external factors. But it is indicative of a neurosis if in spite of gifts and favorable external possibilities for their development the person remains unproductive; or if in spite of having all the possibilities for feeling happy he cannot enjoy what he has; or if in spite of being beautiful a woman feels that she cannot attract men. In other words, the neurotic has the impression that he stands in his own way.

Leaving aside the manifest picture and looking at the dynamics effective in producing neuroses, there is one essential factor common to all neuroses, and that is anxieties and the defenses built up against them. Intricate as the structure of a neurosis may be, this anxiety is the motor which sets the neurotic process going and keeps it in motion. The meaning of this statement will become clear in the following chapters, and therefore I refrain from citing examples now. But even if it is to be accepted only tentatively as a basic principle it requires elaboration.

As it stands the statement is obviously too general. Anxieties or fears—let us use these terms interchangeably for a while—are ubiquitous,

and so are defenses against them. These reactions are not restricted to human beings. If an animal, frightened by some danger, either makes a counter-attack or takes flight, we have exactly the same situation of fear and defense. If we are afraid of being struck by lightning and put a lightning-rod on our roof, if we are afraid of the consequences of possible accidents and take out an insurance policy, the factors of fear and defense are likewise present. They are present in various specific forms in every culture, and may be institutionalized, as in the wearing of amulets as a defense against the fear of the evil eye, the observation of circumstantial rites against the fear of the dead, the taboos concerning the avoidance of menstruating women as a defense against the fear of evil emanating from them.

These similarities present a temptation to make a logical error. If the factors of fear and defense are essential in neuroses, why not call the institutionalized defenses against fear the evidence of "cultural" neuroses? The fallacy in reasoning this way lies in the fact that two phenomena are not necessarily identical when they have one element in common. One would not call a house a rock merely because it is built out of the same material as a rock. What, then, is the characteristic of neurotic fears and defenses that makes them specifically neurotic? Is it perhaps that the neurotic fears are imaginary? No, for we might also be inclined to call fear of the dead imaginary; and in both cases we should be yielding to an impression based on lack of understanding. Is it perhaps that the neurotic essentially does not know why he is afraid? No, for neither does the primitive know why he has a fear of the dead. The distinction has nothing to do with gradations of awareness or rationality, but it consists in the following two factors.

First, life conditions in every culture give rise to some fears. They may be caused by external dangers (nature, enemies), by the forms of social relationships (incitement to hostility because of suppression, injustice, enforced dependence, frustrations), by cultural traditions (traditional fear of demons, of violation of taboos) regardless of how they



may have originated. An individual may be subject more or less to these fears, but on the whole it is safe to assume that they are thrust upon every individual living in a given culture, and that no one can avoid them. The neurotic, however, not only shares the fears common to all individuals in a culture, but because of conditions in his individual life—which, however, are interwoven with general conditions—he also has fears which in quantity or quality deviate from those of the cultural pattern.

Secondly, the fears existing in a given culture are warded off in general by certain protective devices (such as taboos, rites, customs). As a rule these defenses represent a more economical way of dealing with fears than do the neurotic's defenses built up in a different way. Thus the normal person, though having to undergo the fears and defenses of his culture, will in general be quite capable of living up to his potentialities and of enjoying what life has to offer to him. The normal person is capable of making the best of the possibilities given in his culture. Expressing it negatively, he does not suffer more than is unavoidable in his culture. The neurotic person, on the other hand, suffers invariably more than the average person. He invariably has to pay an exorbitant price for his defenses, consisting in an impairment in vitality and expansiveness, or more specifically in an impairment of his capacities for achievement and enjoyment, resulting in the discrepancy I have mentioned. In fact, the neurotic is invariably a suffering person. The only reason why I did not mention this fact when discussing the characteristics of all neuroses that can be derived from surface observation is that it is not necessarily observable from without. The neurotic himself may not even be aware of the fact that he is suffering.

Talking of fears and defenses, I am afraid that by this time many readers will have become impatient about such an extensive discussion of so simple a question as what constitutes a neurosis. In defending myself I may point out that psychic phenomena are always intricate, that while there are seemingly simple questions there is never a simple answer, that the predicament we meet here at the beginning is no exceptional one,