



On the relationship between Karen Horney's tripartite neurotic type theory and personality disorder features

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Abstract

Karen Horney's 1945, 1950 interpersonal theory [Horney, K. (1945). *Our inner conflicts*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.; Horney, K. (1950). *Neurosis and human growth*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.] postulated that individuals could move toward, move against, and move away from others as manifestations of their character development. In the present studies, it was hypothesized that Horney's tripartite theory might be useful in the elucidation of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders personality disorder features. In the first study, college students ($n = 198$) completed the Coolidge Axis II Inventory [CATI; Coolidge, F. L. (1999), *Coolidge Assessment Battery Manual*. Port Huron, MI: Sigma Assessment Systems and Coolidge, F. L., & Merwin, M. M. (1992). Reliability and viability of the Coolidge Axis II Inventory: a new inventory for the assessment of personality disorders. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 59, 223–238] and Cohen's 1967 35-item test [Cohen, J. B. (1967). An interpersonal orientation to the study of consumer behaviour. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 4, 270–278] of Horney's three types: Compliant, Aggressive, and Detached. In the second study, another group of college students ($n = 881$) completed the CATI and Coolidge's 57-item test of Horney's three types. Results showed that both scales were reliable, generally similar, and numerous predicted correlational relationships were found. The usefulness of Horney's constructs in the understanding of personality disorders was discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Karen Horney (1945, 1950) proposed a tripartite interpersonal theory couched in the language of her own clinical experience. She postulated a basic anxiety rooted in a child's feelings of isolation and helplessness in a threatening and hostile world. She thought that this anxiety could be

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enhanced by a number of environmental factors, but that it was often due to problems in the parent–child relationship. These problems could include, for example, parents who were dominating, indifferent, or erratic; who failed to respect a child’s needs or to provide guidance; who demonstrated demeaning attitudes and either a lack of or excessive admiration; or parents who displayed a lack of warmth and failed to keep promises.

As a reaction to bad parenting, Horney (1945, 1950) theorized that a child could develop a sense that the parents were hypocritical by contrasting their inadequate parenting with their professed love, generosity, and Christian charity. As a function of these influences, the child would strive for ways to cope. Horney believed that these coping mechanisms were not simply ad hoc defenses, but that they might become lasting character trends that she called “neurotic trends”. According to Horney, three main defenses would crystallize: A child can move *toward* people, *against* people, or *away from* people. Horney further hypothesized that a healthy individual was free to vacillate between any of these three interpersonal orientations, and these orientations might help to foster self-realization. She also theorized that all three neurotic types might not encompass the entire healthy personality. A brief review of Horney’s three predominant neurotic types follows.

1.1. Moving toward people

Known as the Compliant type, these individuals accept their own helplessness and try to gain reassurance and protection against the basic anxiety by attempting to win the affection of others and sometimes attaching themselves to a person or group that they perceive as powerful. Horney thought that Compliant types might thus gain a feeling of support and belonging which minimizes their feelings of weakness and isolation. According to Horney, Compliant types appease others at any interpersonal cost including self-subordination and the dropping of any claims to individuality. They also evaluate themselves by what others think and become overly dependent on other people for love and safety.

1.2. Moving against people

Known as the Aggressive type, these people accept the hypocrisy and underlying hostility in their environment, and they fight, either consciously or unconsciously, to protect themselves and to seek revenge. They automatically distrust other people’s feelings and intentions, and they rebel in whatever way they can.

1.3. Moving away from people

Known as the Detached type, these people do not have feelings of belonging or the desire to fight. They not only distance themselves from others, but they are also estranged from themselves. They become numb to their own emotional experiences and feelings, and they are uncertain as to their own identity needs and desires. They consciously and unconsciously avoid emotional involvement with others and have a strong need for self-sufficiency.

Despite calls for more investigations of Horney’s theories (i.e. van den Daele, 1987), there has been a dearth of empirical research. The purpose of the present studies was to address this lacuna. Horney’s tripartite theory is important to study, because it is a clinically based theory which can

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