Internal Conflict and the Role of Neurosis

by Grace Ferguson

To understand the different levels of human conflict and aggression, we must first identify the birthplace of conflict: the mind – the initiator of all behaviors, as it is our thoughts that dictate our actions. For inner conflict to occur, there has to be a disturbance in the mind (Horney, 1937). If the mind is at rest, it will not experience inner conflict, nor will it provoke behaviors indicative of internal struggle.

There is a close correlation between inner conflict and neurosis – which is a psychic disturbance driven by anxieties (or fears) and defenses against fears, and by efforts to find solutions to the problems at hand. Note that the presence of inner conflict does not necessarily mean that there is neurosis. Inner conflict is simply the battle inside someone’s mind – this fight can stem from a particular situation and be related only to that situation. Problems we see within the situation itself are the spawn of inner conflict. For example, when deciding between two job offers, we may grow conflicted, but in the end, we make a choice. In this case, there is no neurosis, only inner conflict. Neurosis exists when anxieties or fears and defense mechanisms against fears are compounded with inner conflict (Horney, 1937).

There is a tendency to associate neurosis with medical conditions, such as phobias and depression. However, these are not sufficient bases for identifying neurosis, as they may not be present in the individual. A person can be inwardly conflicted or neurotic without being medically ill. The line between neurotic and non-neurotic (whom we will refer to as “normal”) persons can be tough to distinguish, as there may be several implications, including from a cultural standpoint. In her book, The Neurotic Personality of Our Time, acclaimed psychoanalyst
Karen Horney explains the reactions of the neurotic individual versus those of a normal person and the intrinsic role culture may play.

**Factors Influencing Neurosis**

While “neurosis” was originally conceived as a medical term, it cannot be applied today without considering cultural influences (Horney, 1937). For example, a young woman who works for a corporation where there is room for advancement prefers to remain in a low-rank position and refuses to accept more wages. We may be inclined to consider her as neurotic because most of us identify with behavior patterns that show us wanting to succeed beyond the bare minimum. However, if this young woman lives in a culture where competitive drives or getting ahead in the world are of little importance, she would be regarded as normal in that society. Therefore, before labeling someone as “neurotic,” we should consider their cultural background, as their attitudes and actions might be normal within the context of their tradition. The woman in the above-stated example may appear to be making abnormal choices. In reality, however, she might not be undergoing any internal struggle, being content with the professional choices she has made.

Even if there are no cultural implications, there may be personality factors. For instance, the young woman in our example may feel as though she made a wise decision to not seek a job promotion or accept more wages, in order to avoid office politics which she prefers not to deal with. It is possible that neurosis has no part in her decision.

If we have no intimate knowledge of someone’s background or personality, there are two characteristics that may be used to determine whether neurosis exists: lack of flexibility in reactions and inconsistencies between potentials and achievements (Horney, 1937). For example, a normal person grows suspicious only when he believes the situation warrants being doubtful,
but a neurotic individual may be mistrustful all the time – here we see a lack of flexibility (or rigidity) in the thought process. Or, a normal person may know the difference between sincere and insincere compliments, but the neurotic person does not see any variance between the two, or may dismiss the difference altogether. This rigidity in reactions is symptomatic of neurosis only when there are no cultural patterns deeming these responses as normal (Horney, 1937).

Likewise, the inconsistencies between a person’s potential and actual achievements might be due to cultural patterns. In the absence of cultural patterns, there is a possibility of neurosis if that person receives all the external opportunities or gifts needed to progress, but remains unproductive; or is simply unhappy with everything he has obtained. A man who has all the potentials for contentment but cannot enjoy them could be considered neurotic. An attractive woman who feels that men do not find her physically appealing might be neurotic. The mind of the neurotic is a battlefield, where he feels as though he is standing in his own way (Horney, 1937).

The following is an example – based on Herman Hesse’s novel, *Siddhartha* – of the beginning of inner conflict, which could lead to neurosis.

![Beginning-Internal Conflict](image-url)

- “Siddhartha had begun to feel the seeds of discontent within him. He had begun to feel that the love of his father and mother, and also the love of his friend Govinda, would not always make him happy, give him peace, satisfy and suffice him.” (pg 5)
- This is an internal conflict, because Siddhartha doesn’t feel happiness with his life. He wants to do something else.
Within all neuroses, there is one common factor: anxieties and the defense mechanisms we use to counteract them. Despite all the complexities involved in neurosis, anxiety is the engine that triggers neurosis and keeps it running. In the presence of neurosis, inner conflict becomes more complex and intense, as anxiety dominates. In the above example, anxiety can ensue, as Siddhartha struggles to find internal peace.

**Anxiety and Fear**

Existential psychologist, Rollo May, in his influential book, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, writes that anxiety is a universal and profound phenomenon in the twentieth century. According to May (1977), researchers of anxiety – such as Freud, Horney and Goldstein – all agree that anxiety is diffused, or dispersed, apprehension. Although the terms “anxiety” and “fear” are often used interchangeably, even by Horney, May asserts that there is a difference.

Fear is a response to a specific danger, while anxiety is vague and unspecific (May, 1977). Anxiety produces feelings of helplessness and uncertainty, attacking us on a more intricate level than fear. For example, a student tells his classmate “good morning,” but the classmate does not respond. The student then experiences deep-seated anxiety, which sparks piercing feelings of inferiority that stay with him all day long, as he questions whether he’s “good enough.” In keeping with May’s theory, an example of fear is if the classmate pulls a knife on the student, who then reacts in trepidation. The student’s fear dissipates as soon as the classmate puts the knife away, or is no longer perceived as a threat.

According to May (1977), both fear and anxiety can be equally strong, though anxiety permeates us on a deeper level. With anxiety, the threat must be connected to something in the core or essence of the personality, such as to the self-esteem or a person’s feelings of self-worth. In other words, anxiety is prompted by a threat that the individual’s holds valuable to his
personality’s existence – such as the love of another person, the threat of death, or the loss of freedom. Regardless of how painful fear might be, it is felt as a threat which can be detected and might be adjustable. Anxiety, however, assaults the base of the personality – we cannot position ourselves outside of the threat, or objectify it, as it cannot be spotted spatially (May, 1977).

“Anxiety” and “fear” are commonly used in the same context, and we will use them interchangeably for illustrative purposes. Anxieties (or fears) and defenses against them are pervasive, felt by both humans and animals. In the face of danger, a frightened animal either fights back or flees. Normal humans have the same responses of fear and defense. While the neurotic person shares these reactions, the fears and defenses that qualify their responses as neurotic lie in two aspects.

First, in every culture there are fears caused by life conditions, which can be brought into existence by external dangers such as enemies and nature, social relationships such as hostility caused by injustice or arguments with others, or cultural mores such as breaking taboos or customs. These types of fear are thrust upon us, and we cannot escape them. While the neurotic individual shares these cultural fears, his anxieties also derive from conditions in his own personal life, causing his fears to deviate from cultural patterns (Horney, 1937).

Secondly, cultural fears can usually be kept at bay through protective methods, such as taboos, which provide a reasonable way of handling the fear. Despite having to manage cultural fears, a normal person can reach his potential and live a satisfying life; he does not undergo any more sorrow than is inescapable within his culture. Because the neurotic individual pays a higher price for his defenses, he experiences much more suffering than the average person (Horney, 1977).
In the neurotic individual, there is the existence of conflicting tendencies, which he attempts to find compromise solutions for. While he can arrive at solutions, the results are less suitable than those of a normal person – his entire personality also becomes negatively affected by this process.

**The Seed of Hostility**

As discussed, no one is immune from anxiety or inner conflict. What sets neurotic behavior apart from normal behavior is the manner in which the person handles anxiety or inner conflict. According to Horney (1937), when people feel their need for love and affection were not fulfilled during childhood, they develop *basic hostility* toward their parents, and eventually *basic anxiety*.

People react to basic anxiety by either moving toward people, moving against people, or moving away from people. While a normal person will use any of those styles as a coping mechanism, the neurotic person prefers to depend on just one – a sign of his rigidity. The following is Horney’s analysis of a normal person’s defenses against anxiety versus those of a neurotic individual:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defenses against Anxiety</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NORMAL DEFENSES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toward People (friendly, loving personality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against People (survivor in a competitive society)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Away from People (independent, serene personality)</td>
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The basic conflict of neurosis involves feelings of helplessness, protection against hostility of others, and feelings of isolation. Following our example of Siddhartha’s internal conflict, below is a depiction of the ending point.

Siddhartha’s inner conflict has transformed into hostile thoughts, indicating neurosis. He feels helpless and resentful because things did not unfold as he expected, and internal peace still eludes him. Considering this outcome, one has to wonder whether neurotic hopelessness can be resolved. It can, according to Horney, whose theories on this issue are in divergence from those of philosopher and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Horney argues that the neurotic’s attempts at solution are both more futile and destructive than those of a normal person, and conflicts are not solvable through rational decision. However, these conflicts can be resolved by altering whatever personality condition is responsible for bringing about the issues.

Freud, on the other hand, developed the theory that neurosis derives from deeply traumatic experiences that happened in the past, but are now forgotten. His suggested treatment is to help the patient recall the experience to consciousness and confront it. Eda G. Goldstein (1995), emeritus professor of social work, states that many, including Horney, regard Freud as
pessimistic about the potential for human growth. Horney states that at the root of Freud’s theories is the notion that man is doomed to suffer or destroy, unless impulses are tamed through sublimation (channeled into something less harmful) or controlled. According to Goldstein (1995), “many do not agree with Horney’s portrait of Freud, but it is true that psychoanalytic theory did not focus on the adaptive, rational, problem-solving, and self-actualizing capabilities of people” (p. 5).

In considering the different theories, there appears to be a trifold connection between inner conflict, neurotic tendencies and aggression. We will explore this progression next.