

## **Karen Horney (1885–1952)**

Horney, within the psychoanalytic movement, represents a shift from internal, biological motivation to external, social motivations (Pervin, 1989). In her practice she began to notice that many psychological problems were of a social, rather than a sexual, nature. This led her to question the universality of sexual impulses and of the Oedipus complex. The Electra complex (the female version of the Oedipus complex) and other Freudian concepts came to be questioned by psychologists and women. Freud's penis envy was considered extreme chauvinism. Horney particularly disagreed with Freud's contention regarding *anatomy as destiny*, the notion that a number of personality characteristics are determined by one's gender. She argued that traits are determined more by cultural than biological factors.

She agreed that women may feel inferior to men but not due to penis envy. They are inferior due to cultural opportunity rather than biological nature. To Freud the instinctual roots of childbirth reside in the mother's unconscious desire to have a penis which is symbolized by the baby. This, to Horney, did not resemble the actual experience of motherhood. In fact, in treating men, Horney found that it was men who were envious of the other's biological make-up, i.e., capacity to bear children. She referred to what she called *womb envy*, men's fear and jealousy of women's inherent power to give birth and nurture life, leading males to react in pursuits of power, e.g., physical or political.

Freud was culture bound. Horney believed that Freud's concepts (id, ego, superego, unconscious sexual motivation, Oedipus complex) were appropriate to his cultural setting but of little relevance to the problems being faced by people during the depression of the 1920s. The problems people faced had to do with potential job loss, rent money, family and medical care. Rarely were unconscious sexual conflicts the root cause of difficulties in clients. Horney concluded that social experiences determined whether a person would have psychological problems, not intrapsychic conflict. Mental disorders were rooted in society and social interaction. Horney, instead, emphasized disturbed human relationships, especially parent-child relations.

Whereas Freud believed any analysis of mental difficulties required a trained analyst, Horney was more optimistic. Freud disregarded the ability of people to change their own personalities but Horney had a greater belief in people. Besides, how many poor people could afford the extreme costs of psychoanalysis. As a result, Horney was one of the first to write affordable self-help books.

### References

Pervin, L. A. (1989). *Personality: Theory and research* (5th ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.