

Do We Need the Concept of "Guilt Feelings?"

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Ever since the publication of Karen Horney's *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* in 1937, (1) guilt feelings have become more and more frequent as an explanation of neurotic behavior, considerably obscuring the clarity that Adler had introduced into the understanding of human motivation. 1937 was also the year of the death of Adler, and it seems imperative that twelve years later we examine carefully how far we need the concept of "guilt feelings" as an additional concept to Adler's "feeling of inferiority." Horney's book which we have just mentioned gives us a good basis for such a study.

On page 87, Horney says:

In our culture a child is usually made to feel guilty for any feelings or expressions of hostility or opposition; that is, he is made to feel unworthy and contemptible in his own eyes if he either expresses or feels resentment against the parents or if he breaks rules set up by them. These two reasons for feelings of guilt are closely interrelated.

The "that is" in the above quotation establishes an equation of considerable interest to us: it makes of the famous "guilt feelings" an equivalent of the inferiority feelings. What else is "to feel unworthy and contemptible" but to feel inferior?

On page 144 we hear of a wife who has become ill in reaction to the infidelity of her husband. Horney says:

Her illness is implicitly a kind of living reproach, intended to arouse guilt feelings in her husband.

We could put it "to arouse feelings of inferiority."

In Chapter 13, headed "Neurotic Guilt Feelings," we find, on pages 230-235, a description of what Horney sees as "the various mani-

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festations which indicate the existence of guilt feelings," and which we can summarize as follows:

A neurotic person is inclined:

- 1) to feel that he does not deserve any better.
- 2) to have diffuse feelings of not deserving any kindness, praise, success.
- 3) to expect recrimination for something he has done, if someone asks to see him.
- 4) to assume that it was his fault if anything goes wrong.
- 5) to blame himself, even if others are blatantly in the wrong.
- 6) to assume that others are right, in any argument or collision of interests.
- 7) to accuse himself in a fantastic and grossly exaggerated way.
- 8) to make everlasting efforts to appear justified in his own and in others' eyes.
- 9) to have a haunting fear of being found out or being disapproved of.
- 10) to look upon the analyst as a judge and himself as a criminal.
- 11) to make self-deprecatory statements such as "I knew that I was a coward."
- 12) to have a compulsive striving for perfection out of a need to avoid any disapproval.
- 13) to feel definitely more at ease if an adverse event occurs, such as losing a fortune or incurring an accident. He sometimes seems to arrange or provoke adverse happenings, if only inadvertently.

If we look at this list of neurotic manifestations, there is not one for the explanation of which we would require the concept of "guilt feelings" instead of Adler's concept of "feeling of inferiority." We would also say that the socially tabooed thoughts and activities (masturbation, incest wishes, death wishes towards relatives), which Horney considers sources of feelings of guilt, are but sources of feelings of inferiority.

Behind symptom 13 in the above list, Horney sees:

guilt feelings so strong that he develops a need for punishment in order to get rid of them

while an Adlerian sees here only joy of the neurotic over the fact that, due to new circumstances, he can now escape constantly renewed exposure to situations in which he is likely to appear inferior, in the eyes of others, his own, or both. No Adlerian will be astonished if he finds a neurotic, i.e., a person with a very deep feeling of inferiority,

arrange "adverse happenings" in order to escape threats to his self-esteem.*

To illustrate the difference between the Freudian viewpoint (2) (followed closely by Horney) and the Adlerian viewpoint, let me interject here as a sample one of the many neurotic symptoms of a thirty-year-old lawyer, whose symptoms had previously been diagnosed and "treated" by a Freudian as "self-punishment in the form of 'substitutional castration' that cut off all favorable developments because of the existence of a repressed Oedipus complex":

The lawyer had asked his best friend to come to a certain centrally located street corner in town. When they met, he declared that he wanted to break off their friendship. Against the protests of his friend who saw no credible reason for such an end to their friendship, the lawyer declared that he would not meet him again.

The hidden reason, unknown to the consultee, was revealed to the counsellor when, several months after the break and the unsuccessful Freudian treatment, he talked about a new friend, remarking, "My only friend is inferior to me."

Asked about the old friend he had broken with, the consultee reluctantly revealed that, before the break, he had felt that young man to be the only person in town whom he had to consider superior to himself.

The "unconscious need for punishment for an unconscious (repressed) complex" has been found to be, in the case of this and all the other symptoms, a simple case of avoidance of inferiority situations.

Norman Cameron, (3) though he strongly stresses the importance of guilt feelings, is close to us in interpretation when he says:

The demand a patient makes, that he be made to pay for his crimes and his worthlessness, comes in part from need-satisfaction sequences which most persons acquire in relation to guilt during early childhood. The child's misdeed is met by parental condemnation and rejection, but punishment cancels out the crime and brings the child acceptance. (p.529) Young children . . . can seldom withstand the pressure of emotional rejection. (p. 314)

*The desire to escape inferiority situations or other difficulties must not be looked upon as the only psychological cause of accidents. We must be careful not to overstretch the finalistic interpretation. "Ill-at-ease-ness" (*unbehagen, malaise, malestar*) in a disliked situation naturally causes preoccupation with the self and, in consequence, diminished attention to the outside world.

As we see, behind the desire to be punished there is the desire to be accepted, i.e., to get out of the inferiority situation of being rejected.

On page 271, on the other hand, Cameron expresses himself in a way that suggests we all have split personalities:

Every child . . . learns to play the part of his disapproving, threatening and punishing elders towards his own forbidden trends.

I would simply say that we feel inferior in our own eyes according to what was inferior in the eyes of those who gave us our early education. Cameron's "self-reactions" are, to my mind, nothing but attempts to do away with feelings of inferiority, even in cases where the individual does mete out punishments to himself.

Some cases of "self-punishment," found in psychoanalytic literature, make us think of another finalistic motivation besides the one of freeing the self from feelings of inferiority. We might call it: "facilitation of repetition notwithstanding the negativity of the action."

A. A. Brill (4) gives us two good examples of this motivation:

A mother observed her four and a half year old daughter eating chocolates which were forbidden to her. But every time she devoured a piece she struck herself a smart blow on her hand. When her mother asked her why she struck herself in this manner, she said: "I spank myself because I am naughty."

This need for punishment often shows itself in a peculiar manner. Thus, a young girl of nine was seduced by her father's chauffeur and she visited him regularly in the garage. But following each visit she was seized with remorse to the extent that she often confessed to her mother such peccadilloes as spending too much money on sweets, neglecting her lessons, or breaking something valuable. The effect she displayed in these matters seemed so exaggerated that it led to the discovery of the true state of affairs.

While Karl A. Menninger, (5) for instance, sees a "propitiatory compulsion" in these cases, we can, I think, safely talk about a psychic trick not understood by the children: if they punish themselves or have themselves punished for their forbidden actions, they are able to repeat them, a thing they could not do without having "settled" their previous debt to parents or society.

Summing up, it seems to me unnecessary to operate with the concept of guilt feelings as separate from the feeling of inferiority. *To feel guilty is to feel inferior*, and behind requests for punishment and self-punishment there is the desire to free oneself of inferiority in the eyes of others, one's own, or both.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- (3) Norman Cameron, M.D., Ph.D.: *The Psychology of Behavior Disorders, A Bio-social Interpretation*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947.
- (4) A. A. Brill: "Psychopathology of Crime, Its Psychiatric and Social Implications," *Journal of the American Institute of Homeopathy*, March 1929.
- (5) Karl A. Menninger: *The Human Mind*, New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1930; p. 327.