Regine Blackman

PSY 441- Theories of Personality

Dr. S. Maret

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Horney- Question 4

Explain the origins of neurotic behavior in early family experiences.

Karen Horney believed that social and cultural conditions played a primary role in fostering

pathology. Simply put, neurotic behavior was primarily the result of disturbed human

relationships in early family experiences. Mistreatment by parents and siblings (not to mention

one's peers, and figures of authority) could all contribute to maladjusted functioning.

Horney suggests that children who grow up in families where they are verbally and physically

abused by their parents tend to develop a largely unconscious sense of powerlessness and

insignificance.  Because of this they develop an incessant and indiscriminate striving for personal

superiority, an effort to combat the inner contradiction of inferiority impressed upon them in

their early family experiences- enter in hypercompetitiveness. Consequently, these children

develop a neurotic behavior that become adults end up treating "competitors" in the same

abusive manner which they experienced growing up.

Conversely, children growing up in homes where they constantly feel they are standing in the

shadows of uberly popular and adored parents especially parents who regard children with

indifference or show a lack of support, respect, guidance, love or genuine interest (also can be experienced from high achieving sibling), tend to develop a sense of low self-esteem/worth due to feelings of insecurity. These children believe that in order to be loved or at least approved of they must maintain the status quo, leading them to shy away from competition for fear of losing approval of others if successful, or worse yet if they fail. As a result of this neuroticism which keeps them longing to be in the good graces of others, they tend to silence voices of rebellion and hostility and live a life of compliance, conforming to group standards for the sake of being accepted and to feel secure in their environment.