

Bowlby, John. "Separation anxiety: a critical review of the literature." J. Child Psych. & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines, 1960, 1, 251-269.

"No concept is more central to psychoanalytic theory than the concept of anxiety." (251) Yet, there is a great divergence of opinion among psychoanalytically oriented theorists as to the nature and origin of anxiety. As a result, one finds that the topic of separation anxiety has received many widely differing formulations and varied amounts of attention among the particular schools of thought.

A need was therefore felt for this systematic review of the literature in order to "relate the behavior of young children on separation from their mothers to traditional and current theory" (251) The author notes three main sequences of behavior among young children who are removed from their mother figure, which he terms 'Protest', 'Despair', and 'Detachment'. There is a corresponding theoretical problem raised by each of these stages: "Protest raises the problem of separation anxiety; Despair, that of grief and mourning; Detachment, that of defence." (251) Thus, the concept of separation anxiety should be viewed within the overall context of a progression through three phases of a single process. It is pointed out that Freud, in 1926, was sketching out this very sequence in the role of anxiety: "Anxiety is a reaction to the danger of losing an object, the pain of mourning to the retreat from the lost object, defence a mode of dealing with anxiety and pain." (252)

Six principal theories are delineated, and then discussed according to the views of the main contributors: These are:

1. Transformed Libido. Freud's view of separation anxiety as an example of "morbid anxiety" due to the transformation into anxiety of sexual excitation of somatic origin which cannot be discharged." (252)
2. Birth Trauma Theory. Anxiety associated with separation of young children from their mother is a reproduction of the trauma associated with birth. Birth anxiety therefore becomes the prototype of all separation anxiety.
3. Signal Theory. Anxiety behavior is a signaling device, expected to ensure that the mother (being signaled) will not be parted for very long. This theory stems from Freud's notion of the child's tie to his mother as a secondary drive phenomenon.
4. Depressive Anxiety. As a result of the child's ambivalence toward mother, he believes that "when she disappears that he has eaten her up or otherwise destroyed her, and that in consequence he has lost her for good." (253)
5. Theory of Persecutory Anxiety. After projecting his aggression onto the mother, the young child interprets her leaving as persecutory -- being angry or punishing him. Anxiety arises out of his belief that she will never return or return angry.
6. Primary anxiety. This theory, which is the one followed by the author, holds that anxiety is not due to anything other than the fact of separation from the mother; it is a primary response.



### Main Contributors

Sigmund Freud. He did not turn his systematic attention to separation anxiety until 1926. Previously he had written, "Anxiety in children is originally nothing more than an expression of the fact that they are feeling the loss of the person they love." (254) In 1917 he concludes that "infantile anxiety has little to do with real anxiety, (dread of real danger) but is...closely allied to the neurotic anxiety of adults. It is derived like the latter from undischarged libido." (254)

In Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety (Freud, 1926) Freud refuses an earlier assumption regarding the nature of anxiety: Whereas he formerly believed anxiety was the product of repression, clinical observations suggested the opposite -- that repression is the result of anxiety. He observes in the conditions of a child being alone, or in the dark, or with an unknown person, that "These three instances can be reduced to a single condition, namely, that of missing someone who is loved and longed for. But here, I think, we have the key to an understanding of anxiety...anxiety appears as a reaction to the felt loss of the object." (256)

Nevertheless, Freud was puzzled as to how to explain this reaction of anxiety. The author suggests that "Today we can draw upon modern instinct theory to frame an hypothesis which regards this inability to cope with 'the cathexis of longing' as the essence of the problem...separation anxiety is seen as a function of a persistent and intense motivation, which, when terminating conditions are absent, presents the child with a situation in which he is 'helpless in the face of excessive excitation'" (256) Freud, writing 30 years ago, without the current notions of instinct theories, could only conceive of the child's attachment to the mother in terms of secondary drive.

Freud concludes that there are two sources of anxiety. The first is an "automatic phenomenon" with physiological features, that "occurs whenever a traumatic situation is 'established in the id'". (257) This idea seems to be a descendant of his earliest notion of anxiety as stemming from a nervous system incapable of dealing with a mass of excitation by an adequate reaction.

The second source is "anxiety as a 'rescue signal' designed to indicate that danger is impending. Since it requires foresight, such anxiety can only be 'felt by the ego'" (257). This kind of anxiety, depending upon foresight and expectation is thought to be an important advance in the individual's capacity for self-preservation.

Ernest Jones. Since Jones makes no mention of Freud's work Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety in his theory of aphanisis, it must be inferred that he was unaware of Freud's thinking regarding anxiety. (Aphanisis: "the fundamental fear is the total and of course permanent extinction of the capacity (including opportunity) for sexual enjoyment" 258)). However, two years later, (1929) Jones attempts to integrate his theory of aphanisis with Freud's Signal Anxiety theory. In this attempt, all the present author cares to say is that " Jones accepts Freud's view regarding signal anxiety, believing that it is 'purposely provoked by the ego so as to warn the personality' of the possible approach of serious dangers, and then...adds to Freud's conception of what constitutes the traumatic situation his own notion of aphanisis." (258)



Melanie Klein. Anxiety to this theorist, is to be understood in terms of the death instinct. She does not share Freud's skeptical view of the fear of death as a primary anxiety source because "there is in the unconscious (according to her analytic observations) a fear of annihilation of life...thus in my view the danger arising from the inner working of the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety." (258) She continues that this anxiety, arising from the death instinct, takes the form of fear of persecution. She follows Freud's distinction between objective anxiety (known external danger) and neurotic anxiety (unknown or internal danger) and feels that both contribute to the infants' fear of loss of the mother. "Objective anxiety arises from the child's complete dependence on the mother for the satisfaction of his needs and the relief of tension; neurotic anxiety derives from the infant's apprehension that the loved mother has been destroyed by his sadistic impulses or is in danger of being destroyed, and this fear...contributes to the infants feeling that she will never return" (259).

In evaluating Melanie Klein's contributions the author notes that her theory was already developed before her attention turned to separation from mother as a source of anxiety. Her fault of overgeneralizing may be seen in her regarding unconscious aggression as the sole source of separation anxiety, rather than an important and frequent source.

Anna Freud. Anna Freud always approaches the problem of separation as if the child's tie to his mother is to be accounted for by secondary drive theory. "Since the infant has no needs but those of his body, interest is at first confined to an interest in anyone who meets those needs; in so far as there is anxiety at separation from mother, it is a result of the fear that physiological needs will go unmet" (259). If the mother is indifferent, or has allowed too many others to substitute for her, "the transformation from greedy stomach love to a truly constant love attachment is slow to come. The infant may remain too insecure and too worried about the fulfillment of his needs to have sufficient feeling to spare for the person or persons who provided for them" (9262). The author points out that her conclusion is the logical outcome of the signal anxiety theory of separation anxiety, and the secondary drive theory of ~~separation anxiety~~ the child's tie to the mother.

#### Other Contributors.

Schur (1953) in his study of anxiety, postulates two sources of anxiety. These are 1) "the presence of fright and flight reactions characteristic of the phase of development which begins with the ability to perceive external objects", and 2) an earlier phase when danger is an economic, inner danger, which stems from physiological need satisfaction. From this latter source of anxiety, he views separation anxiety as a learned derivative: "The realization that an external object can initiate or end a traumatic situation displaces the danger from the economic situation to the condition which determines the situation. Then it is no longer hunger that constitutes danger for the child but it is the absence of the mother." (262)

Kris (1950) draws a distinction between the danger of losing the loved object and the danger of losing the object's love. The latter, he theorizes, represents an advance in ego development, which does not occur before 12 months. The author criticizes this viewpoint for not corresponding to clinical observation, and therefore regards Kris' distinction as "speculative and mistaken" (263).

Therese Benedek, although concerned with problems of separation and reunion with loved persons, does not undertake a systematic discussion of separation



anxiety. Several of her ideas are mentioned which view anxiety as a response to the danger of ego disintegration.

Spitz (1950) advances a new variation of the signal anxiety theory, which is called the theory of narcissistic trauma. He first discusses the development of object relations, "from a phase of narcissism (first three months) through a phase of preobjectal relations (second three months) to a phase of true object relations (third three months)...It is in the third quarter that true objects appear for the first time. They now have a face, but they still retain their function of a constituent part of the child's recently established Ego. The loss of the object is therefore a diminution of the Ego at this age and is as severe a narcissistic trauma as a loss of a large part of the body...Anxiety is a signal to warn against the danger of a narcissistic trauma." (264A)

H.S. Sullivan regards anxiety as a function of the child's relationship with the mother and other significant persons. It is regarded as a product of the mother's attitude. Separation from the loved object itself as inducing anxiety, is ruled out by Sullivan.

#### The Author's position.

Enlarging upon the views of Winnicott, (1941, 45) and others, the author conceives of separation anxiety as simply the infant's primary reaction to isolation. William James, in 1890 wrote, "The great source of terror in infancy is solitude" (266). The infant is seen to be motivated by a number of instinctual response systems, "each of which is primary and which together have a high survival value." (267) Conditions of isolation tend to activate these instinctual response systems until he is in close proximity with the mother. Primary anxiety is not a signal to warn against something else, but rather, an "elemental experience and one which, if it reaches a certain degree of intensity, is linked directly with the onset of defense mechanisms"(267). Primary anxiety is thought to arise whenever any instinctual response system is activated but not terminated.

The advantages of a theory of primary anxiety, according to the author, are that it accounts for observations of infant behavior, and also anxiety behavior in primates. In addition, it can be related to the theories of grief and mourning.

