

Annihilation Anxiety and Parental Representation

In Adolescence

By

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**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University**

New York

2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When undertaking a project of this magnitude, many people help along the way making it difficult to include everyone that contributed. However, there are certain people whose help, assistance, and patience were essential to the successful completion of this project and degree.

First, I would like to give a general thank you to all the pre-graduate school teachers and professors who inspired in me the desire to learn and evolve. Without great teachers, education would be meaningless.

From my personal life, there have been so many supportive and helpful people that I apologize to anyone that I miss. I would like to thank my parents and brother and sister for making education a priority throughout my life. I would also like to thank all those families who “lent” me their time and children so that I could practice and hone my skills in the area of assessment. The families who were most generous in this way include the Quiglys, Moores, Cartwrights, and Kuglers. The children were very pleasant and helpful, sitting for up to three hours with me, with no expectation of reward and the parents let me take over a room in their house to do this.

Also from my personal life, I would like to thank Robert Moore who aided me in finding people to test for my assessment classes and reminded me that a graduate student should not skip class. He lived with me during the length of the graduate program, providing ongoing motivation and support despite several personal and financial obstacles. I thank him especially for the sacrifices he made for the sake of my education.

I would also like to thank John DeMartini for supporting me at the end of this long journey, keeping me going to the finish line with encouraging and motivating words.

Thank you to all my fellow graduate degree pursuers who were there at important times to empathize such as all of my Pace classmates, who began this journey with me in Fall 1998, as well as Betty Stubee, and Michelle Hunt.

I also have to thank all of my advisors in my internships and practicums, especially Dr. Frank Epifanio, who, unfortunately just recently passed away. His guidance has meant a great deal to me both personally and professionally.

From the Pace community, there are also so many people to thank. First, I would like to give a posthumous thank you to Dr. Al Melino who was an inspiring and energetic professor. His willingness to learn and grow after being in the field for several years as well as his obvious love and appreciation for the field will continue to inspire and motivate me to grow and evolve as a psychologist.

Other professors that I would like to thank include Dr. Stokes, Dr. Chissolm, Dr. Sossin, and Dr. Rafferty whose classes were enlightening and enjoyable. I have to thank Dr. Ward for being patient as I completed this project and for offering his guidance on an ongoing basis. Thank you to Dr. Beth Hart for all the time and effort she put into advising me on this project, never giving up on me and always having an encouraging word. Thank you to Dr. Weihua Niu who came on as my consultant three years ago. I cannot express how much her input has helped me as well as how helpful and meaningful the time she dedicated to me was, going out of her way several times to help me reach my goals. Thank you, Dr. Ward, Dr. Hart, and Dr. Niu for being a great team and helping me towards completion of this goal.

To all those mentioned, my sentiments to you are best expressed by Albert Schweitzer, “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” All of you are partially responsible for my future accomplishments in the field of psychology. Thank you again for keeping the fire going!

ABSTRACT

Research shows anxiety disorders are among the most common mental-health problems to occur during adolescence, indicating a need for research into anxiety disorders in this age group. Research in terms of parental representation supports that quality of attachment to the parental figure is correlatively related to emotional functioning. The current study investigated extreme anxiety in adolescence, in terms of Hurvich's theory of annihilation anxiety, measured by the Hurvich Experience Inventory, and how it correlates with adolescent's parental representations and aspects of the individuation process using Hart's Inventory of Parental Representation (IPR) and The Profile of Adolescent Depression and Individuation (PADI).

The participants in this study consisted of 484 ninth through twelfth graders (246 females and 238 males) attending a public high school in Westchester County, New York. They were part of a larger longitudinal study conducted by Pace University from 1988-1993.

The results indicated that most of the variables associated with parental representation, measured by the IPR, and with individuation and depression, measured by the PADI correlated significantly with level of annihilation anxiety. Both parental representation and aspects of individuation in adolescence can explain 35.9% (adjusted R square = 32.9%) of the total variance of annihilation anxiety. Both contributions are significant at the .01 level, which means that both parent representation and aspects of individuation in adolescence contribute significantly to level of annihilation anxiety. Aspects of individuation in adolescence was the strongest predictor of level of annihilation anxiety, accounting for 34.4% of the total variance.

This study aids mental health professionals in intervention planning and helps the adolescent become more aware of how the nature of their primary attachments impact their attempts at separation and individuation as well as its impact on depression and counter-depressive defensive strategies, which can be a pathway to significant and positive therapeutic change.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Anxiety disorders plague at least 10 percent of children and adolescents. They are among the most common mental, emotional, and behavioral problems to occur during childhood and adolescence (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Several studies indicate that 10%–21% of children report clinical levels of anxiety often leading to impaired functioning (e.g., Benjamin, Costello, & Warren, 1990; Gurley, Cohen, Pine, & Brook, 1996; Pine, 1994). Many studies have indicated that most child anxiety disorders remain stable and do not diminish with time (Keller et al., 1992; Pine, Cohen, Gurley, Brook, & Ma, 1998). Studies also suggest that children or adolescents are more likely to have an anxiety disorder if their parents have anxiety disorders (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2003).

These statistics highlight the need for research into anxiety disorders in young people to understand its underlying causes and effective interventions. Clearly, anxiety is a major problem for adolescents and many who suffer from it are not getting the help they need. It is also clear from the research that those who suffer from anxiety at a young age are likely to suffer from it as adults, highlighting the need for effective interventions at its onset for adolescents who suffer from severe anxiety. To begin the process of helping adolescents suffering from anxiety disorders, researchers need to understand the origins of these disorders. In an overview of research looking to link child anxiety and control issues with psychological disturbance in adulthood, Chorpita and Barlow (1998) indicated that researching childhood anxiety would indeed provide significant information when trying to conceptualize emotional functioning in adulthood.

The concept of anxiety has been a basic element of psychological theories from the beginning of the science of psychology. Freud, for instance, spent a great deal of energy and time in theorizing about anxiety and how it develops. One type of anxiety that Freud (1923/1961) defined was traumatic anxiety, which is the “fear of being overwhelmed or annihilated”, arising

out of early experiences with attachment figures, attachment figures being parents/caregivers, especially the mother figure. Expanding on Freud's concepts, theorists have defined traumatic anxiety as "the fear of one's impending psychic or physical destruction" (Benveniste, et al 1998). What triggers this anxiety is a threat to one's survival (Hurvich, 2003).

Looking at Freud's theory of traumatic anxiety, Hurvich (1989) studied it in its most intense, extreme form, terming it "annihilation anxiety". When a parent does not meet an infant's basic needs, its survival is threatened. As no parent can meet every need all the time, it is likely that all infants have experienced this anxiety to some degree. However, for this anxiety to reach the level of annihilation anxiety, other factors contribute, usually a parent's consistent failure to meet the infant's needs. As awareness of self grows, the needs of the infant, expanding from basic physical needs, begin to also include psychological and emotional needs, which, when neglected, also can lead to anxiety. When the anxiety about psychological as well as physical needs that are not being met reaches an extreme level due to a consistent failure of caretakers to meet these needs, annihilation anxiety is not only a fear of physical injury or death, but also becomes a fear of psychic destruction. Therefore, annihilation anxiety is the term Hurvich uses to describe Freud's concept of traumatic anxiety in its extreme form, when overwhelming anxiety is experienced as the fear of physical and/or psychic destruction.

Wanting to understand what makes traumatic anxiety reach the level of fear of physical and psychic destruction, Hurvich (2004), through his work, has developed a detailed definition of annihilation anxiety. The first major characteristic of Hurvich's concept of annihilation anxiety is survival threat. Secondly, these anxieties can resurface at anytime when there is a "perception-fantasy of survival threat." Furthermore, annihilation anxiety is central to psychic trauma and has "major traumatic residuals" which can later lead to ego weakness and pathological thinking patterns. Hurvich (2004) links annihilation anxiety with how one views oneself as well as one's parents and appears to be related to aggressive impulses. Additionally, when a person is

experiencing and trying to defend against annihilation anxieties, therapeutic change in dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors is extremely difficult.

Hurvich (1989) asserts that understanding annihilation anxiety can be significant in a myriad of ways, stating,

annihilation anxiety plays a significant role in a wide range of psychopathological manifestations, including nightmares, panic states, many phobias, and traumatic and post-traumatic stress disorders. It can be consequential for the process of psychoanalytic therapy and may influence resistance, transference, and countertransference in a given treatment. (pp. 309)

Hurvich (1989) further asserts that the original anxiety surrounding being overwhelmed in infancy is experienced "passively and preverbally," however, later in development, the anxiety can be anticipated and thus can be considered one of Freud's "basic dangers" defined as, "'a recognized, remembered, expected situation of helplessness" (p. 166).

In adolescence, when attachment issues reassert themselves and issues of separation and individuation become more intense, this anxiety can again become active particularly when the adolescent's emotional needs for psychological space and autonomy are not recognized and respected by primary attachment figures. If the parents are unwilling to facilitate the adolescent's autonomy and they do not provide a safe base for exploration, annihilation anxiety, theoretically, can reach dramatic heights and have negative consequences. For instance, an adolescent whose autonomy is too restricted might feel threatened by their parent's overwhelming presence, as if their existence and selfhood are at stake. In response to feeling overwhelmed, adolescents might act out in unsafe ways so as to regain their sense of separateness. This need to assert selfhood may result in unsafe behaviors which can include drug use, eating disorders, and other behaviors that are associated with a battle for control.

Understanding psychopathology as an outgrowth of unhealthy parental representations and difficulties with the individuation process has significant implications for psychological interventions. Lopez, Mitchell, and Gormley (2002) discuss these implications as well as finding once again support for the connection between psychological disorders and issues surrounding attachment. In their study, involving 127 college students, they found that ability to deal with distress negatively correlated with an insecure attachment orientation. They suggest; therefore, that in therapy, attachment orientation should be assessed in anxious students. Furthermore, through the mediational variables they found, involving self-splitting and self-organization, they assert that targeting these mediating factors in therapy can improve attachment orientation and thereby reduce anxiety through improving affect regulation.

Not only can annihilation anxiety be linked with psychological disorders, it can also be a barrier to enjoying closeness in relationships. Alperin (2001), in fact, asserts that the very elements of annihilation anxiety are obstacles to experiencing intimacy. He asserts that, “fear of fusion, a fear of object loss, paranoid-schizoid anxieties, and sexual anxieties” prevent the development of intimacy. In adolescence, this can be a significant problem because this is the time in which they are supposed to be developing intimate relationships outside the family of origin. With a lack of the relationships, isolation and dissatisfaction can develop, affecting the adolescent in multiple ways.

Conceptualizing adolescent behaviors from an attachment perspective opens up new avenues of insight and suggests a whole new approach to treatment for adolescents acting out in extreme ways. For instance, a psychologist may be faced with a suicidal adolescent. One approach would be to use cognitive behavioral techniques to treat the underlying depression. Through an attachment paradigm, the treatment can be taken one step further, looking at the dynamics underlying the depression which may be attachment related. From the perspective of this mindset, therapy could also be more family driven, in which the parents’ actions and changing parental behaviors are also a large consideration in the process.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Attachment Theory

Henry Ward Beecher said, "There is no friendship, no love, like that of the parent for child." This simple assumption has a host of complex implications for the field of psychology and theories on attachment. When trying to understand attachment theory, one must start with the theorist who first wrote extensively on the parent-child relationship and how it affects a person's emotional and psychological functioning, Sigmund Freud. Roberts (2008) provides this excerpt from Freud which expresses clearly the importance of parental representation and the individuation process:

This first object is later completed into the person of the child's mother, who not only nourishes it but also looks after it and thus arouses in it a number of other physical sensations, pleasurable and unpleasurable. By her care of the child's body she becomes its first seducer. In these two relations lies the root of a mother's importance, unique, without parallel, established unalterably for a whole lifetime as the first and strongest love-object and as the prototype of all later love-relations - for both sexes. (P. 7 11b)

While much of Freud's theory on the relationships between the developing infant and caregivers focuses on unconscious sexual drives, from which future researchers diverged, his in depth look at the nature of these relationships opened up a whole realm of possibility for understanding how people develop in terms of early experiences with caregivers. He set the tone for a host of researchers and theorists trying to connect experiences in infancy and childhood with the way people function as adults.

Therefore, as with many of Freud's theories, his intellectual descendants expanded and reworked his ideas. Bowlby and Ainsworth, for example, expanded and reshaped theories surrounding the parent and infant relationship, eventually developing a delineation of attachment that still is referenced in attachment research today. To clearly understand how their theories