

ANXIETY: THE DREAD OF A FUTURE EVENT

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Phenomenologically, anxiety must be seen as the psycho-physiological feeling tone associated with fear of the occurrence of an event, fear of something about to happen, rather than fear that something has happened. This can easily be verified through introspection or interviews with patients. You are likely to hear from them, "I'm afraid something will happen," or "I'm scared I'm going crazy," or "they're going to catch me," and so on. You will notice that when the past tense is used by a person with regard to a situation, the accompanying affect is not anxiety, unless there has been a premeditated effort to help the person to "relieve" the situation, or there is worry that the unwanted event might reoccur. For example, a paranoid schizophrenic I have treated could describe the "past events" of his being poisoned by doctors (at this time he no longer believed this was happening) with remarkable calm, matter-of-factness, but, when he would attempt to talk about the effect this poisoning would have when he would look for a job, he would become markedly upset. He was anxious lest his present limitations caused by the "poisoning" would prevent him from ever again functioning as a normal human being.

FUTURE ORIENTATION IN VARIOUS THEORIES

The essential future orientation of anxiety has, of course, been recognized by most personality theorists (e.g., 4, 14), but most have chosen not to emphasize this observation. Although they acknowledge that anxiety serves a signal or warning function, they do not fully attempt to assess the truly far-reaching consequences of such a notion. Freud initially described anxiety as a consequence of the inadequate discharge of sexual energy, often associated with *coitus interruptus*. He came to modify his views to suggest the importance of anxiety as a signal (6, 7, 8, 13). According to Thompson:

Freud's theory assumes that the forces within the Id are of dangerous proportions, the danger being greater or less according to the relative strength of the Ego. The earliest experiences of anxiety occur when the Ego is still weak because it is in the process of developing. This early experience sets the pattern for all later life. Having been dangerously threatened once, the Ego tends to assume that the same situation will always be a danger to it. So in life when similar situations arise, anxiety appears as a warning. This is a signal for the defenses of the Ego to go into action (14, p. 120).

But instead of examining the significance of a process directed toward anticipating the future, for indeed anxiety served as a signal for what might come to pass, Freud turned to the developmental history of the individual, the individual's past, to discover what genetic core situation was causing the threatening difficulties. Such a return to the past history of the organism has generally been the technique of psychiatry and psychology, as, e.g., Glasser (9, p. 42) has pointed out. As Allport has phrased it, "People, it seems, are busy leading their lives into the future, whereas psychology, for the most part, is busy tracing them into the past" (1, p. 51).

There are, however, notable exceptions to this "past" orientation. These include, in addition to Allport, Kelly (11), Jung (e.g., 10), and Adler (e.g., 3). Jung has commented:

Life is teleology par excellence; it is the intrinsic striving towards a goal, and the living organism is a system of directed aims which seek to fulfill themselves. The end of every process is its goal. All energy flow is like a runner who strives with the greatest effort and the utmost expenditure of strength to reach his goal. Youthful longing for the world and for life, for the attainment of high hopes and distant goals, is life's obvious teleological urge which at once changes into a fear of life, neurotic resistances, depressions and phobias if at some point it remains caught in the past, or shrinks from risks without which the unseen goal cannot be achieved (10, p. 5).

LIMITATION OF PAST ORIENTATION

The reason that mental science has generally turned to the genetic history of an individual in an attempt to understand him is undoubtedly complex. Ansbacher (2), in dealing with just that topic, concluded that objective psychology with its dogma that only that which is open to an outsider and is objective is scientific, must, of necessity, deal with the *causa efficiens* or the moving cause of behavior because only the past and present existed or are existing in objective, physical reality. He contrasts objective with subjective psychology, the psychology of phenomenology, of Adler, which concerns itself also with the *causa finalis*, the final cause of teleology and purposivism. Clearly, if one starts out with the position that all behavior is a function of past experience, as positivistic reductionists do, by definition, the future is nothing but the past operating on the present, nothing but what has been learned by reacting to present stimuli. Whether this notion be expressed in terms of past conditionings or reinforcement history (e.g., 12, 17), or instinctual development (e.g., 6) makes no difference.

However, if we accept the notion that anxiety is a signal of future doom, we have let the camel's nose into the tent, and it becomes

obvious that the objectivist position needs modification. How far in the future can the events be of which the signal warns? By what solely past and present oriented mechanism does this come about? These questions have to be answered, and they can not be answered sticking to empirical data, without taking into account some notion of expectancy which extends the life space of the individual well into the future.

The only argument that makes the objectivist position with respect to anxiety temporarily tenable is that anxiety is a sort of mechanism like a thermostat, a cybernetic device (16) which allows for change when the present physical tension reaches a certain state. That may well be, but unlike a thermostat, the anxiety device monitors not only the present but the future, or at least monitors expectations of the future and demands upon the future.

For example, announce an examination to a group of students to take place in four weeks. Tell them it is going to determine their grades which will be reported two weeks after the examination and that it may affect their later careers. Watch the anxiety mount. Even the student who has never done poorly before will become anxious if he feels that a goal which he greatly desires is involved. There is no adequate way in which this behavior can be explained by the past oriented objectivist.

Once we recognize that people do expect—and anxiety is the result of an expectation—any analysis of behavior in terms of the past and present becomes inadequate and misleading. This has wide relevance, especially so, since, as many have pointed out (e.g., 5), anxiety is the neurotic core symptom, other pathological responses such as compulsions being attempts to deal with anxiety and, therefore, the expected future. Psychopathology can be seen as an attempt to control time, and agreement is reached with Freud when he states, “We have long observed that every neurosis has the result, and therefore probably the purpose, of forcing the patient out of real life, of alienating him from actuality. . . . The neurotic turns away from reality because he finds it unbearable—either the whole or parts of it” (7, p. 13). The neurotic takes himself out of reality because he attempts to deny the future of which he is afraid and to substitute for it the unrealness of psychic comfort.¹

¹At this point, it should be mentioned that correlational and experimental evidence has been accumulated that neurotics and psychotics have disordered time orientations. Wallace and Rabin (15) have summarized such research until 1960. However, at this time no unequivocal experimental evidence is available. Hopefully, some of the author's current researches may provide some.

To stipulate that a person fears an event and takes steps to avoid the realization of that doom, is not enough. We must also determine the nature of the feared event. In Adler's sense this would always be "the fear of being proven worthless or the fear of defeat" (2, p. 303).

USEFULNESS OF EMPHASIS ON FUTURE

Practically, the concept of anxiety as fear of a future event has great usefulness. It allows for the searching of the past to determine what goal the person is afraid of failing to reach, the modification of the present in altering the goal or planning to meet it, and action to modify the future. Often the latter course brings spectacular results.

For example, if an individual is experiencing anxiety with respect to some future event such as an examination, further structuring or restructuring of the event may bring immediate relief. This was so in the case of a student in a panic about the possibility of failing a language examination, until he learned that such an examination had been eliminated as a requirement for an advanced degree. Other cases are, of course, not as simple as this and yield less clear-cut results.

John was a 9-year-old boy referred to the clinic for evaluation. He was diagnosed at one time as having hysterical blindness, though at the time of first treatment contact he apparently was seeing well. In the course of interviews with the parents it became obvious that the boy received a strict, fundamentalist, Protestant upbringing; his father was a minister. Important to the parents and demanded of their children was obedience to what they saw as God's will. And it was God's will for people never to become angry at anyone nor to fight with anyone no matter what the provocation.

When later John attended a public school in which his religious zeal became well known, an attempt to test the virtue of the virtuous soon began, as often happens in such situations. Every day after school, when walking home, the same two children would approach John, subject him to a torrent of verbal abuse, rough him up, and throw him in a ditch. Apparently they viewed their job as a sort of crusade. John was caught in a bind of not being able to defend himself, nor tell his parents about what was happening, for fear of being judged ungodly. His parents, for their own convenience, chose not to notice the dirt, the cuts, and bruises, or contented themselves with the notion that he had fallen down, fallen out of a tree, or had been splashed by a passing car.

John's teacher began to notice that he became anxious as the end of the day neared. She also noticed increasing withdrawal and uncommunicativeness. John, being quite young, eventually hit upon, as it turns out, the magical solution to his troubles. If he could not see the time, he would not be going home to

be jumped, and if he did not see his assailants, they could not hurt him. So, at recesses, he began to stare at the sun, until spots came and until he convinced himself he couldn't see. Then he began to behave as if blind. Thus the hysterical blindness. By considering his future expectations, his strange behavior made sense, and, although it was not easy, changes in his future were made. The events which he had feared were removed: His parents eventually called the parents of the children who were jumping John and asked them to discipline their children. Eventually his parents began to try to understand themselves and their child.

Another case that illustrates the importance of recognizing anxiety as the response to a future threat to an important goal is that of David, a 29-year old, diagnosed as a manic-depressive. David was totally subservient to his mother. He ran a small business with her, a safe job except that she was intent never to let him grow up and leave her as her husband had done. Much as he hated the situation and his mother, David was afraid that he would fail if he were to try something on his own. His cyclothymic style of life protected him from really acting as an autonomous adult. Whenever he made a move to progress, to take a new job, to try a new future, he would become extraordinarily anxious. Retreating from his future took the form of transmuting his anxiety into mania: He could do all, he could conquer all. But, half-cocked, he soon destroyed his opportunities for advancement, as could be expected. He failed. With failure would come hate, depression, martyrdom, sympathy from his mother, and above all distance from the future. In the course of therapy, working toward realistic goals, making realistic plans, pointing out that failure was not so horrible, and so forth, he started to become less cyclothymic, at first more anxious, and finally less anxious.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In closing something should be said to the argument that a future-oriented psychology is less scientific for it deals with events that have not yet occurred.

One must acknowledge that all definitions of human "time" are artificial. Man's perception of time is molded rather than imposed. The past-present-future trichotomy is a man-imposed manner of dealing with the changes we see around us. There are many other, just as plausible, views of reality. For example, one might argue that man can directly and totally experience only the now. It is impossible in the present to feel the pain of four years ago or ten years from now. Therefore, all that "exists" is the present. One way to choose from among the many views of time that are available is to determine to what use you want to put the system and see how well it compares with its alternatives.

This paper has aimed at demonstrating that in predicting and understanding behavior the notion of the future must be included. While we think of the future as largely unstructured, it is far from

that. Much of it can be predicted. Whether the prediction be that half of the uranium in a rock will be lead at time now + x, or that students will get report cards, the accuracy of that prediction is close to perfect. Humans continually make such predictions and order their lives about them. In many circumstances, it is possible to make predictions for others with considerable accuracy also, for the future is structured to a large extent both by society and the individual. Without taking into consideration this structuring and the fact that man moves through time, no comprehensive scientific psychology of human behavior is possible.

The usefulness of emphasizing the future in anxiety has been found to lie in aiding the understanding of what the individual fears, directing therapy toward changing future events, and more especially, changing the individual's expectations of the future or his goals.

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