Anxiety Disorders: Some Emerging Theories

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Accepted October 10, 1984

The influential Miller-Mowrer theory of fear and avoidance served well for over 30 years, but the need for revisions is now irresistible. The evidence in support of the first part of the theory, the conditioned acquisition of fear, is reviewed briefly and the major weaknesses of the theory are identified. The insufficiency of the second part of the theory, which deals with the persistence of avoidance behavior, is noted. Six emerging themes and theories of anxiety are described and briefly compared: Lang's bioinformational theory, Gray's neuropsychological theory, Beck's cognitive theory, Eysenk's neo-behavioristic theory, emotional processing, and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Attention is given to "the 3 pathways to fear acquisition" hypothesis, and to the role of safety signals in maintaining avoidance behavior. This subject is undergoing a period of healthy ferment, and significant advances in understanding can be expected to occur in the near future.

KEY WORDS: anxiety disorders; theories; conceptualization; methodology.

The position here taken is that anxiety is a learned response, occurring to signals that have in the past been followed by situations of injury or pain. Anxiety is thus basically anticipatory in nature and has great biological utility in that it adaptively motivates living organisms to prepare for or flee from traumatic events in advance of their actual occurrence, thereby diminishing their harmful effects. However, experienced anxiety does not always vary in direct proportion to the objective danger in a given situation, with the result that living organisms, and human beings in particular, show tendencies to behave irrationally; i.e., to have anxiety in situations that are not dangerous or to have no anxiety in situations that are dangerous . . . . Anxiety may effectively motivate human beings, and the reduction of anxiety may serve powerfully to reinforce behavior that brings about such a state of relief or security. (Mowrer, 1939, p. 565)

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The above quotation from Mowrer's famous and influential theory, published over 45 years ago, has a modern ring to it. It is clear, assertive, accommodating, and enduring, and it provides a firm background against which we can assess some new ideas on fear and anxiety. In keeping with Mowrer's practice, no distinction will be made between fear and anxiety. The key features of the theory, in which Mowrer drew fruitfully from the writings of James, Pavlov, Watson, and Freud, are as follows. Anxiety is regarded as a (conditioned) learned response and is anticipatory and functional. It is protective, sometimes irrational, and a powerful source of motivation (mainly of avoidance behavior). This behavioral avoidance in turn is strengthened by its own success in reducing anxiety.

After a long and successful beginning, during which the theory played a major role in the development of behavior therapy, doubts began to accumulate. These doubts were acknowledged and stored until recently, when they began to spawn alternative conceptions of anxiety. Six of these new ideas include Gray's (1982) neuropsychological theory, Beck's (1974, 1982) cognitive theory, Lang's (1977, 1083) bioinformational theory, Eysenck's (1982) revised neobehavioristic theory, Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, and the concept of emotional processing as applied to fear (Rachman, 1980).

During the first decade of development in behavior therapy, especially the European stream, the nature and modification of anxiety were selected as the central theme and the central task. In all of this work, particularly that exemplified by the writings of Wolpe (1958) and Eysenck (1953), the strong influence of Mowrer's theory and its elaboration in the Miller-Mowrer extension of the theory is evident and explicitly acknowledged. These two leading theorists and most of their colleagues took the view that anxiety is a learned response and that the learning process involved was a form of conditioning. To take one example, Wolpe and Rachman wrote in 1960 that "any neutral stimulus . . . that happens to make an impact . . . at about the time that a fear reaction is evoked, acquires the ability to evoke fear subsequently. If the fear in the original situation is of high intensity or if the conditioning is repeated a good many times, the conditioned fear will show the persistence that is characteristic of neurotic fear . . . ."

The main effort of the early behavior therapists was directed to the search for ways in which fears, especially the disproportionate and unadaptive ones, could be modified for therapeutic purposes. The starting point for much of this work can be traced to the conception of fear embodied in Mowrer's theory. It was reasoned that if anxiety can be learned, presumably it can also be unlearned. Might it not be possible, they argued, that we can turn those very processes of fear acquisition into procedures for reducing