SEPARATION ANXIETY: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

JOHN BOWLBY
Tavistock Clinic, London

INTRODUCTION

No concept is more central to psychoanalytical theory than the concept of anxiety. Yet it is one about which there is little consensus of opinion, which accounts in no small measure for the divisions between different schools of thought. Put briefly, all analysts are agreed that anxiety cannot be explained simply by reference to external threat: in some way processes usually thought of as internal and instinctive seem to play a crucial role. But how these inner forces are to be conceptualized and how they give rise to anxiety has always been a puzzle.

As a result of this state of affairs we find, when we come to consider how psychoanalysts conceive separation anxiety, some widely differing formulations: for each formulation is strongly influenced by the particular outlook regarding the nature and origin of anxiety which the analyst happens to have. Moreover, the place given to separation anxiety within the wider theory of anxiety varies greatly. For some, like Hermann and Fairbairn, separation anxiety is the most important primary anxiety; for others, like Freud in both his earlier and later work, it is only the shortest of steps removed from being so; for others again, like Melanie Klein and her associates, separation anxiety is deemed to be secondary to and of less consequence than other and more primitive anxieties. This being the present state of thought, inevitably a review of literature has to touch on all aspects of the theory of anxiety. It will, however, be my aim to restrict the wider discussion as far as possible.

The reason for undertaking a systematic study of the literature arose from the need to relate observations of the behaviour of young children on separation from their mothers to traditional and current theory. Such observations show that the sequence of behaviour, which commonly occurs when children between the ages of about twelve months and four years are removed from the mother-figures to whom they are attached to the care of strangers, falls into three main phases: Robertson and I have termed these ‘Protest’, ‘Despair’ and ‘Detachment’. * An examination of the theoretical problems posed shows that each phase raises a different one: Protest raises the problem especially of separation anxiety; Despair that of grief and mourning; Detachment that of defence. Although in this paper and its companion I am concerned only with the first, separation anxiety, the overall context in which I view it is of consequence. The thesis I am advancing in this series of papers (Bowlby, 1952, 1953). In earlier papers the term ‘denial’ was used to denote the third phase but this has proved misleading and is replaced by the term ‘detachment’.

*See Robertson and Bowlby (1952), Robertson (1953).
1960a, b) is that the three types of response—separation anxiety, grief and mourning, and defence—are phases of a single process, and that when treated as such each illumines the other two.

Often in the literature they have been considered piecemeal. The reason for this appears to be the inverted order in which their psychopathological significance was discovered: for it was the last phase which was recognized first and the first last. As a result, despite much work by qualified analysts and others on both the short- and long-term effects of separation, separation anxiety has never gained a central place in psychoanalytic theorizing. Kris (1956), writing as a participant in the Viennese scene, remarked recently that, when in 1926 Freud advanced his views regarding separation anxiety, “there was no awareness amongst analysts . . . to what typical concrete situations this would apply. Nobody realized that the fear of losing the object and the object’s love were formulae to be implemented by material which now seems to us self-evident beyond any discussion.” He acknowledged that only in the past decade had he himself recognized its significance, and could have added that even today there are schools of analytic thought which deny its importance. The continuing neglect of separation anxiety is well illustrated by a recent and authoritative survey of "the concept of anxiety in relation to the development of psychoanalysis" (Zetzel, 1955) in which it is not once mentioned.

In the event, it is clear, some of the ideas advanced by Freud in 1926 fell on stony ground. This was a pity, since in that book, written at the end of his professional life, he was struggling to free himself of the perspective of his travels—defence, mourning, separation anxiety—and instead to view the sequence from his new vantage point: the priority of separation anxiety. In his concluding pages he sketches out a new route: anxiety is a reaction to the danger of losing the object, the pain of mourning to the retreat from the lost object, defence a mode of dealing with anxiety and pain. This is the route I am following.

**PRINCIPAL THEORIES**

Before considering in detail the views advanced by each of the main contributors to our theme, it may be useful to outline the principal hypotheses now in the field and also to indicate the one the present writer believes to be best fitted to the evidence.

A study of the literature shows that there have been six main approaches to the problem of separation anxiety; three of them are the counterparts, though not always the necessary counterparts, of theories regarding the nature of the child’s attachment to his mother (see Bowlby, 1958). In the order in which they have received attention by psychoanalysts, they are:

(1) The first, advanced by Freud (1905), is a special case of the general theory of anxiety which he held until 1926. In 1894 Freud had advanced the view that morbid anxiety is due to the transformation into anxiety of sexual excitation of somatic origin which cannot be discharged. The anxiety observed when an infant is separated from the person he loves, Freud holds, is an example of this, since in these circumstances the child’s libido remains unsatisfied. This theory may be called the theory of ‘Transformed Libido’. It resembles in many ways the sixth main approach, which is the one I have adopted.

(2) The anxiety shown on separation of young children from mother is a
reproduction of the trauma of birth, so that birth anxiety is the prototype of all the separation anxiety subsequently experienced. Following Rank (1924) we can term it the ‘Birth-trauma’ theory. It is the counterpart of the theory of ‘return-to-womb craving to account for the child’s tie.

(3) In the absence of the mother the infant and young child is subject to the risk of a traumatic psychic experience, and he therefore develops a safety device which leads to anxiety behaviour being exhibited when she leaves him. Such behaviour has a function: it may be expected to ensure that he is not parted from her for too long. I shall term this the ‘Signal’ theory, a term introduced by Freud (1926). It is held in three variants according to how the traumatic situation to be avoided is conceived. They are: (a) that the traumatic situation is an economic disturbance which is caused when there develops an accumulation of excessive amounts of stimulation arising from unsatisfied bodily needs; (b) that it is the imminence of a total and permanent extinction of the capacity for sexual enjoyment, namely aphanisis (Jones, 1927). (When first advanced by Jones as an explanation of anxiety, the theory of aphanisis was not related to the anxiety of separation; two years later, however, he sought to adapt it so as to fit in with Freud’s latest ideas.) Finally, (c) there is the variant proposed by Spitz (1950) that the traumatic situation to be avoided is one of narcissistic trauma. In the history of Freud’s thought the Signal theory stems from the theory which explains the child’s tie to his mother in terms of secondary drive.

(4) Separation anxiety results from the small child, owing to his ambivalence to his mother, believing when she disappears that he has eaten her up or otherwise destroyed her, and that in consequence he has lost her for good. Following Melanie Klein (1935) we can call it the theory of ‘Depressive Anxiety’.

(5) Following the projection of his aggression, the young child perceives his mother as persecutory: as a result he interprets her departure as due to her being angry with him or wishing to punish him. For these reasons whenever she leaves him he believes she may either never return or do so only in a hostile mood, and he therefore experiences anxiety. Again following Melanie Klein (1934), this can be termed the theory of ‘Persecutory Anxiety’.

(6) Initially the anxiety is a primary response not reducible to other terms and due simply to the rupture of the attachment to his mother. I propose to call it the theory of ‘Primary Anxiety’. It is the counterpart to theories which account for the child’s tie to his mother in terms of component instinctual responses. It has been advanced by James (1890), Suttie (1935) and Hermann (1936), but has never been given much attention in psychoanalytic circles.

The hypothesis I have adopted (Bowlby, 1960a) is the sixth.

**VIEWS OF MAIN CONTRIBUTORS**

*Sigmund Freud*

We have seen that it was not until 1926, when Freud was seventy, that he gave

*The following account of the history of Freud’s views on anxiety was written before I had had opportunity to read Strachey’s valuable introduction to the new translation (1959) of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (Freud, 1925). I can find no discrepancy between our accounts. Separation of child from mother as a recurrent theme in Freud’s thinking about anxiety is clearly brought out in Strachey’s essay.*
systematic attention to separation anxiety. Prior to this, having paid inadequate attention to the child’s attachment to his mother, as he himself affirms (Freud, 1931), he had paid correspondingly little to the anxiety exhibited on separation from her.* Nevertheless, he had not been blind to it. He had referred to it twice (1905, 1917b) and, as already indicated, had treated it in a way not dissimilar to that adopted here.

In *Three Essays*, after a section concerned with early object relations, he gives a paragraph to ‘infantile anxiety’ (1905, p. 224). In it he advances the view that “Anxiety in children is originally nothing other than an expression of the fact that they are feeling the loss of the person they love”. This view he readily aligns with his hypothesis regarding neurotic anxiety in the adult. At that time, it will be recalled, Freud still held the view that, when a powerful sexual excitation is insufficiently discharged, libido is transformed directly into anxiety. It is the same in children, he believes. Because “children . . . behave from an early age as though their dependence on the people looking after them were in the nature of sexual love”, and because in a separation situation the child’s libido goes unsatisfied, Freud concludes that the child deals with the situation just as an adult would, namely “by turning his libido into anxiety”. Four years later this is also his explanation of the separation anxiety that was Little Hans’ first symptom: “It was this increased affection for his mother which turned suddenly into anxiety” (1909, pp. 24–25).

He follows the same reasoning in the *Introductory Lectures* (1917b). After once again drawing attention to the anxiety exhibited when the mother is missing, he concludes that “infantile anxiety has very little to do with real anxiety (dread of real danger), but is, on the other hand, closely allied to the neurotic anxiety of adults. It is derived like the latter from undischarged libido” (p. 341). This, it will be observed, is very close to identifying the neurotic anxiety of adults with the separation anxiety of infancy, a similarity he had already remarked on (1905).†

Although in the *Introductory Lectures*, for reasons which appear to me inadequate, Freud complicates his theory by postulating that the core of anxiety is a repetition of the affect experienced at birth (1917b, p.331), it is nonetheless the anxiety arising on separation from the mother, as observed empirically, which throughout his writings on infantile anxiety from 1905 onwards holds the centre of the theoretical stage. Anxiety arising at birth, which had first been postulated some years earlier (1910, p. 173), starts by being only a rather speculative addition to his theory. Although it gradually acquires an equal status, it never usurps the place of anxiety arising on separation from mother. This is important since more than one analyst has tended to give it precedence in his theorizing.‡

The next reference to separation anxiety occurs when Freud relates the well-
known cotton-reel incident (1920), which Jones (1957, p. 288) tells us he had witnessed five years previously in Hamburg. His 18-months-old grandson took all sorts of small objects and threw them away into corners and under the bed with an expression which seemed to signify ‘gone’. This appeared to be confirmed when later the boy had a cotton reel on the end of a string and played the double game of throwing it away with an expression of ‘gone’ and pulling it back again with a joyful “da”. This simple game, coupled with the fact that the boy “was greatly attached to his mother”, led Freud to an “interpretation of the game . . . it was related to the child’s great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach” (1920, pp. 14–15).

How well-established this cultural achievement was we shall never know, but if Freud’s grandson followed a common course of development it is unlikely to have been maintained. There are many infants who are able to permit their mothers to leave them for an hour or so without crying when they are 18 months, but who in the succeeding months find this intolerable and make a great fuss. However that may be, the observation of this incident, and no doubt others like it, seems to have clarified Freud’s perception of the child’s tie to his mother and to have led him to reflect further on the theory of anxiety. Never has the direct observation of children by analysts served a better purpose.

It was the publication of Rank’s *Trauma of Birth* in 1924, Freud tells us, “which obliged me to review the problem of anxiety once more”. In this work Rank had taken up the suggestion which, as we have seen, had first been thrown out by Freud himself, “that the effect of anxiety is a consequence of the event of birth and a repetition of the situation then experienced. . . . But I could make no headway with his idea that birth is a trauma, states of anxiety a reaction of discharge to it and all subsequent affects of anxiety an attempt to ‘abreact’ it more and more completely” (Freud, 1926, p. 161). Instead, what Freud does in his ruthless re-examination of theory is to return to the safe ground of empirical observation—which brings him back at once to separation anxiety.

In reading *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926) we find that Freud, after wrestling with the theoretical problems of anxiety through seven chapters, abandons a favourite hypothesis, namely that anxiety represents a direct transformation of libido. His reason lies in his recognition that, whereas formerly he had supposed however, he thinks that in this situation there may also be a reproduction of birth anxiety. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, on the other hand, it is birth anxiety which is described as the prototype. Nevertheless, in one of the Addenda to this work he explains how he could make no headway with Rank’s ideas on the primary role of birth trauma and, referring to his own conclusions, remarks that the significance of birth “was reduced to this prototype relationship to danger” (1926, p. 162, my italics). This is also the position he takes in the *New Introductory Lectures* (1932) where he repeats his view that “Every stage of development has its own particular conditions for anxiety: that is to say a danger situation appropriate to it” (p. 116). The danger situation of birth and the danger of loss of object or of love seem here to be assigned equal status. See also the discussions by Jones (1957, pp. 274–276) and by Strachey (1959, in Freud, 1926, pp. 83–86). Strachey points out that in Freud’s later work, it was only the form taken by anxiety which was to be understood as stemming from the experience of birth.
anxiety to be the product of repression, an examination of clinical material suggests that, on the contrary, repression is the result of anxiety (1926, p. 109). As a result of this, at the beginning of the eighth chapter Freud concludes ruefully that “up till now we have arrived at nothing but contradictory views about [anxiety]. . . . I therefore propose to adopt a different procedure. I propose to assemble, quite impartially, all the facts that we know about anxiety without expecting to arrive at a fresh synthesis” (p. 132). After a brief diversion he proceeds: “Only a few of the manifestations of anxiety in children are comprehensible to us, and we must confine our attention to them. They occur, for instance, when a child is alone, or in the dark, or when it finds itself with an unknown person instead of one to whom it is used—such as its mother. 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” (pp. 136-7).

Up to this point Freud is working from empirical data, data moreover which we can now regard as amply confirmed. Nevertheless he still remains puzzled, as others have also been, as to how to explain his observations. Why should there be this reaction of anxiety? It “has all the appearance”, he remarks, “of being an expression of the child’s feeling at its wits’ end, as though in its still very undeveloped state it did not know how better to cope with its cathexis of longing” (p. 137). Today we can draw on modern instinct theory to frame an hypothesis which regards this inability to cope with ‘the cathexis of longing’ as the essence of the problem. Approaching the problem in this way, 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”. Thirty years ago, however, such ideas on instinctual responses were not current; instead Freud was under the impression that the child’s attachment could not be understood except in terms of secondary drive and that the only primary needs are those of the body.

Freud therefore proceeds: “The reason why the infant in arms wants to perceive the presence of its mother is only because it already knows by experience that she satisfies all its needs without delay. The situation, then, which it regards as a ‘danger’ and against which it wants to be safeguarded is that of non-satisfaction, of a growing tension due to need, against which it is helpless.” This, he continues, is “analogous to the experience of being born. . . . What both situations have in common is an economic disturbance caused by an accumulation of amounts of stimulation which require to be disposed of. It is this factor, then, which is the real essence of the ‘danger’ and which he terms the ‘traumatic situation’. To avoid this, the infant, by a process of learning, displaces “the danger it fears . . . from the economic situation on to the condition which determined that situation, viz., the loss of object. It is the absence of the mother that is now the danger; and as soon as that danger arises the infant gives the signal of anxiety, before the dreaded economic situation has set in” (pp. 137-138).

As a consequence of these considerations Freud concludes that anxiety has two sources. The first source is anxiety as “an automatic phenomenon”, with physiological features which he believes may have been an appropriate response to the
situation of birth, and which occurs whenever a traumatic situation “is established in the id” (pp. 138, 141). This arises, he believes, in “situation(s) of non-satisfaction in which the amounts of stimulation rise to an unpleasurable height without its being possible for them to be mastered psychically or discharged by the infant” (p. 137). They are always characterized by helplessness. In this formulation of this source of anxiety we see a direct descendant of his earliest theory (1894), in which he postulated that anxiety is developed when the nervous system is incapable of dealing with a mass of excitation by an adequate reaction.

The other 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” (p. 140). It is indeed the task of the ego so to imagine the danger situation in advance that it can restrict “that distressing experience to a mere indication, a signal” (p. 162). Freud proceeds to list a number of danger-situations, each corresponding to a particular developmental phase which, if allowed to develop, would result in a traumatic situation: amongst these are birth, loss of object (namely, mother), fear of father, and fear of super-ego (pp. 146–147).

In his account of this second source of anxiety Freud lays much emphasis on the elements of foresight and expectation: “The individual will have made an important advance in his capacity for self-preservation if he can foresee and expect a traumatic situation . . . which entails helplessness, instead of simply waiting for it to happen” (pp. 166). In these respects it is a concept identical to what I have termed ‘expectant anxiety’ (Bowlby, 1960a).

Although, as has been indicated, Freud conceives of separation anxiety itself as no more than a signal and as being developed through a process of learning, as indeed is necessary if it is based on foresight, it is evident that he is not quite satisfied with the conclusion. At the end of the book he returns yet again to “the puzzling question of the phobias of early childhood” and hazards that perhaps, as in other species, at least the fear of loss of object may be a built-in response: thus he refers to an “archaic heritage” and “vestigial traces of the congenital preparedness to meet real dangers” (p. 168). This formulation, and also the similar one in regard to the child’s tie which is found in the Outline (1938) and which was noted in Bowlby (1958), permits me to entertain the agreeable idea that towards the end of his life Freud was searching after a formulation not very different from that advanced here.

It is far more important, however, that in this work Freud finally clarifies what I believe to be the true relatedness of separation anxiety, mourning and defence. Previously, as he candidly admits, he had been confused. Not only had he supposed that repression is antecedent to anxiety, but he had also found it difficult to believe that anxiety as well as grief can be a response to loss of object. Now he sees the sequence clearly: anxiety is the reaction to the danger of loss of object, the pain of mourning a reaction to the actual loss of object, defences protect the ego against instinctual demands which threaten to overwhelm it and which can occur all too readily in the absence of the object (1926, pp. 164–172). As we shall see, this formula has not commonly been adopted by later theorists.

Ernest Jones

When Jones (1927) first advanced his theory of aphanisis, it is evident from the
absence of references to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* that he was unaware of Freud's latest train of thought. Furthermore, there is evidence also that he was still unaware of the libidinal importance of the attachment to the mother (irrespective of the child's sex). We must therefore note that Jones' theory of aphanisis—that "the fundamental fear is (of) the total and of course permanent extinction of the capacity (including opportunity) for sexual enjoyment"—was advanced without any reference to the present topic. The only mention of separation anxiety is in references to weaning as a pregenital precursor of castration and to the girl's fear of separation from her father.

Two years later, however, Jones (1929) strives to integrate his own theory of aphanisis with Freud's theory of signal anxiety. The union is uneasy and the resulting theory appreciably more complex than either taken singly. One of several difficulties is that Jones has still not grasped the reality of the tie to the mother irrespective of the child's sex. Since the combined theory has been little called upon, to delineate it is unnecessary. As a broad generalization, it may be said, 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, in describing these serious dangers, adds to Freud's conception of what constitutes the 'traumatic situation' his own notion of aphanisis.

**Melanie Klein**

Whereas Jones developed his theory of anxiety independently of Freud's and later attempted to marry the two, Melanie Klein not only developed hers independently but has frequently underlined their differences. Anxiety, in her judgment, is to be understood in terms of the death instinct, to which Freud never referred in this connection, and of aggression. Her views in regard to anxiety in general, which were taking shape between 1924 and 1934, and to separation anxiety in particular (Klein, 1948) represent, so far as I know, the only formulation made by a psychoanalyst which is both substantially different from those discussed by Freud and has had significant influence on theory and practice.

In 1926, following a line of argument already advanced (1917b, p. 340), Freud explicitly rejected the notion that fear of death is a primary anxiety and concluded instead that it is a later and learned fear.† Melanie Klein differs: "I do not share this view because my analytic observations show that there is in the unconscious a fear of annihilation of life". This she assumes must be the response to the death instinct. "Thus in my view the danger arising from the inner working of the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety" (Klein et al., 1952, p. 276). This, she suggests, is felt by the infant "as an overwhelming attack, as persecution", and a persecution, moreover, which is first experienced at birth: "We may assume that the struggle between life and death instincts already operates during birth and accentuates the perse-
cutory anxiety aroused by this painful experience”. From this argument she draws an important conclusion regarding the infant’s first object relations: “It would seem”, she says, “that this experience (i.e. birth) has the effect of making the external world, including the first external object, the mother’s breast, appear hostile” (1952, p. 278). Later she summarizes her view in a sentence: “I hold that anxiety arises from the operation of the death instinct within the organism, is felt as fear of annihilation (death) and takes the form of fear of persecution” (1952, p. 296). It is against this backcloth of anxiety being the result of the perpetual activity of the death instinct and of the newborn infant being already burdened with persecutory anxiety that Melanie Klein presents her views on separation anxiety.

Starting from Freud’s distinction between objective anxiety (arising in connection with a known external danger) and neurotic anxiety (arising in connection with an unknown and internal one) (Freud, 1926, pp. 165 and 167), Melanie Klein sees both as contributing to the infant’s fear of loss. She describes their nature as follows: 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 infant’s feeling that she will never return”. Were Melanie Klein to postulate that this depressive anxiety only developed in later infancy, she would not be diverging materially from Freud’s view but only expanding it at an important point. This, however, is not her position. She emphasizes that in her view both sources of anxiety are present from the beginning and are constantly interacting. Because of this, “no danger-situation arising from external sources could ever be experienced by the young child as a purely external and known danger” (Klein et al., 1952, p. 288). On this her own statements and those of her colleagues are consistent. In discussing the cotton-reel incident she dissociates herself explicitly from Freud’s view and concludes “when [the infant] misses [his mother], and his needs are not satisfied her absence is felt to be the result of his destructive impulses” (ibid., pp. 269-270). It is claimed by Susan Isaacs that always “mental pain has a content, a meaning, and implies phantasy. On the view presented here, he behaves as if he were never going to see her again* means his phantasy is that his mother has been destroyed by his own hate or greed and altogether lost” (Klein et al., 1952, p. 87).

These passages seem to make it clear that in their explanations of separation anxiety Melanie Klein and her colleagues see depressive anxiety as virtually its sole component. This, however, is not so since elsewhere they emphasize that the relationship to the mother is itself “a first measure of defence. . . . The dependence on the mother and fear of loss of her, which Freud regards as the deepest sources of anxiety, is from our point of view (the self-preservative) already a defence against a greater danger (that of helplessness against destruction within)” (Joan Riviere in Klein et al., 1952, pp. 46-47). “From the very beginning”, she writes, “the internal forces of the death instinct and of aggression are felt to be the cardinal danger threatening the organism” (ibid., p. 44). Since these forces are let loose during a separation

*This quotation from Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety is from the 1936 English translation, London: Hogarth Press, p. 167.
experience, in the final analysis separation anxiety is seen as a response to the threat of destruction within. Clearly, this theory is very different from that of Freud and also from that advanced here. Whereas Freud gives primacy to anxiety arising from painful feelings of tension resulting from separation, Melanie Klein and her colleagues give primacy to persecutory anxiety.

It should however be added that in various passages Melanie Klein refers to birth as constituting an anxiety-provoking trauma, and seems at times to subscribe to the birth trauma theory of separation anxiety. Thus, following a passage already quoted (ibid., p. 296), she writes: “Other important sources of primary anxiety are the trauma of birth (separation anxiety) and frustration of bodily needs”. Nevertheless, although postulating these additional sources of anxiety, she quickly brings them within the ambit of persecutory anxiety by attributing to the infant a tendency to attach all fears to an object. After having earlier expressed the opinion that “the fear of the destructive impulse seems to attach itself at once to an object”, she completes her statement regarding the trauma of birth and the frustration of bodily needs thus: “and these experiences too are from the beginning felt as being caused by objects.* Even if these objects are felt to be external, they become through introjection internal persecutors and thus reinforce the fear of the destructive impulse within” (ibid., p. 296).

In evaluating Melanie Klein’s views it is essential to realize that her main theoretical outlook was formed in the years preceding the publication of Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, and that, unlike Freud who in the final formulation of his theory took anxiety arising from separation experiences as his point of departure, Melanie Klein had already developed her theory of anxiety before she gave any attention to separation from mother as a situation which provokes anxiety.

When we look back on the early papers of Melanie Klein we remain impressed by the originality of her observations regarding the role of unconscious aggression in promoting anxiety in young children and particularly in promoting an unusually anxious and intense attachment to the mother. It is now abundantly confirmed that behind many a child’s excessively strong or prolonged attachment there lies unconscious hatred. In my judgment, however, she fell victim to the fault of over-generalizing so that, instead of regarding unconscious aggression as an important and frequent condition for the exacerbation of separation anxiety, she came to regard it as accounting for it wholly; and furthermore, identifying the child’s tie to his mother with orality, was led into making assumptions about infants in their first year and into creating a theoretical super-structure which many find unconvincing. This has had two unfortunate results. On the one hand too many of her critics have failed to appreciate the value of her contribution; on the other her followers have been slow to recognize that, immensely important though depressive and persecutory anxieties are, separation anxiety cannot be understood wholly in such terms, and, more important, that disturbances of the mother-child relationship occurring in the second and later years have a far-reaching pathogenic potential.

*Freud is not favourable to this type of theory. He writes: “Such a conception of a child, so suspicious and terrified of an overpowering aggressivity in the world, is a very poor sort of theoretical construction” (1917b, p. 339).
Anna Freud

Whereas Melanie Klein has written much about separation anxiety but recounted few observations of how infants and young children actually behave in such situations, Anna Freud was one of the first to record such observations but has discussed their theoretical implications singularly little. As in the case of Melanie Klein it looks as though a main reason was that her theoretical orientation was already set before Freud’s fresh appraisal of the nature and genesis of anxiety appeared. *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* is not referred to in her book the *Psycho-Analytical Treatment of Children* (1946) which dates from 1926, 1927 and 1945 and, despite a chapter being given to processes of defence in relation to the source of anxiety and danger, there is no reference to separation anxiety and loss of object in *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defence* (1936). Until her experiences with babies and young children in the Hampstead Nurseries during the war, Anna Freud seems to have given little attention to these problems.

In the two modest volumes published with Dorothy Burlingham (Burlingham and Freud, 1942, 1944), observation is sharp and description telling. Of children aged between 1 and 3 years they write: “Reactions to parting at this time of life are particularly violent. . . . This new ability to love finds itself deprived of accustomed objects and his greed for affection remains unsatisfied. His longing for his mother becomes intolerable and throws him into states of despair” (1942, p. 51).

Yet, despite the clear understanding of the grief which is implicit in these responses, neither in these two volumes nor in Anna Freud’s later papers are these manifestations related in any systematic way to anxiety in general or separation anxiety in particular.

Indeed one has the impression that Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud were unprepared for the violence of the responses they saw in the Nurseries, and puzzled how to explain them. For instance, there is a passage (1942, pp. 75–77) where they express the belief that perhaps if separations could be arranged more gradually all would be well: “It is not so much the fact of separation to which the child reacts as the form in which the separation has taken place”. In another passage (1942, p. 57) the distress of the child between 3 years and 5 years is attributed to his belief that separation is a punishment—“To overcome this guilt he overestresses all the love which he has ever felt for his parents”—a passage which suggests that in their view there would be no distress at this age were there not guilt and persecutory anxiety. It is my belief that they get nearer the truth when in these same passages they refer to “the natural pain of separation” and the fact that “unsatisfied longing produces in him a state of tension which is felt as shock”.

Whenever Anna Freud broaches the theoretical interpretation of these responses or of the long-term results of separation (e.g. 1952, 1953), she takes for granted that the child’s tie to his mother is to be accounted for by the theory of secondary drive: 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. Her views are perhaps most clearly expressed in an address to medical students (1953). After describing her conception of how attachment grows in the well-cared-for child she proceeds: “On the other hand, in cases where the mother has carried out her job
as provider indifferently, or has allowed too many other people to substitute for herself, 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 fulfilment of his needs to have sufficient feeling to spare for the person or persons who provided for them*” (my italics). This conclusion is a logical outcome of the secondary drive theory of the child’s tie and the signal anxiety theory of separation anxiety.

*Other contributors*

These are theories to which Nunberg (1932), Fenichel (1945) and Schur (1953, 1958) also subscribe. In his two carefully reasoned studies of anxiety, Schur makes the common assumption that in man the biologically given components of behaviour are strictly limited. In the second study, in which he draws extensively on ethological data and concepts, he details what he believes they comprise. On the one hand he postulates the presence of fright and flight reactions characteristic of the phase of development which begins with the ability to perceive external objects. Here his picture resembles the one I advocate. On the other he postulates an earlier phase (“the undifferentiated phase”) during which “all danger is, due to the infantile development specific for man, ‘economical’, inner danger”, namely a danger which springs from the requirements of physiological need satisfaction. It is from this source of anxiety that he regards separation anxiety as a learnt 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 that situation. Then it is no longer hunger that constitutes danger for the child but it is the absence of the mother.” Although he discusses various dangers which he thinks “may be based on innate givens”, nowhere does he consider the possibility that loss of mother may be one of them.

After he has come to recognize the importance of separation anxiety, Kris (1950) makes a serious effort to incorporate it in his theorizing. His views, however, are based more on inference from previous theory than on induction from observation; in particular he is concerned, like Schur, to cast them in a form compatible with Hartmann’s ego psychology. This leads him to place great emphasis on a distinction between the danger of losing the love object and the danger of losing the object’s love. Although this distinction was referred to briefly by Freud (1926), the way that Kris elaborates it is his own. On theoretical grounds he postulates that the danger of losing the love object is concerned solely with anaclitic (namely bodily) needs and is not concerned with a particular love object. Conversely, the development of a “relationship to a permanent personalized love object that can no longer easily be replaced” he postulates to occur synchronously with the development of responsiveness to the danger of losing the object’s love; it represents, in his opinion, “a decisive step in ego development”. This hypothetical association, however, is not borne out by observation. Anxiety reactions to the loss of a particular love object are to be seen long before it is reasonable to credit the infant with awareness of the danger of losing the object’s love and long before the twelve-month age-limit suggested by Kris (1950). As was emphasized in the paper on the nature of the child’s tie (Bowlby, 1958), the responses mediating attachment behaviour both in man and in lower species tend quickly to focus on a particular figure; and there can be no reason to
suppose their doing so represents an important step in ego development. In the event, therefore, the theoretical distinction advanced by Kris must be regarded as speculative and mistaken.

The crucial connection between anxiety as the reaction to the danger of losing the object, and the pain of mourning as that to its actual loss, which Freud arrives at in 1926, has been little recognized. Only in the work of Melanie Klein and Therese Benedek is it given much place. Curiously, Helene Deutsch (1937) explicitly divorces the two: anxiety is an infantile response, she holds, grief and mourning more mature ones. “The early infantile anxiety”, she writes, “we know as the small child’s reaction to separation from the protecting and loving person.” When the child is older, on the other hand, “suffering and grief [are] to be expected in place of anxiety” (p. 13, my italics). Moreover, separation anxiety in the older individual is to be understood as a regression to infancy, and occurs in situations where “grief... threaten(s) the integrity of the ego, or, in other words, if the ego [is] too weak to undertake mourning” (p. 14). I do not think this differentiation by maturity will stand examination. In the responses of infants and young children to loss of mother, grief is undoubtedly present (Bowlby, 1960b). Conversely, as Therese Benedek among others has recorded, anxiety is the rule even in adults when they are separated for any length of time from someone they love.

For many years Therese Benedek has been concerned with problems of separation from, and reunion with, loved persons, and with responses to loss and bereavement; and, as a result of her clinical work, she has had a lively awareness of the tremendous importance and close relatedness of separation anxiety and mourning. In describing responses to separations, reunions and bereavements occurring during wartime (1946), she frequently speaks of separation as a trauma in itself, and she generalizes boldly: “The universal response to separation is anxiety” (p. 146). She is also keenly alive to the fact that the experience of being separated, or the expectation of separation, from a loved person, leads to a sharp increase in longing for his company. In another publication (1956) she notes that a crying fit in an infant is by no means always caused “by a commanding physiologic need such as hunger and pain, but by the thwarting of an attempt at emotional (psychologic) communication and satisfaction”.

All these observations can be readily and economically explained in terms of the theories regarding the child’s tie, separation anxiety, grief and mourning that I have been advancing in recent papers. Therese Benedek, however, does not adopt these simpler hypotheses. Instead, in all her theorizing, she is committed to a secondary drive theory of the child’s tie to his mother with all its complications and disadvantages. Thus the increase in longing evident in adults at separation, which can hardly be considered other than a natural and normal response, is explained as due to a regression to oral dependency. Indeed, as in the theorizing of other analysts, Therese Benedek tends at times to theorize as though all attachments to loved persons were undesirable regressions to an infantile state.

Unfortunately, nowhere in Therese Benedek’s writings is there any systematic discussion of separation anxiety. In a recent paper (1956), however, two separate theories appear to be adumbrated. The first is similar to Freud’s Signal Anxiety theory, the second is concerned with the danger of ego disorganization. Still struggling
with the same problem that Freud was wrestling with thirty years earlier, she asks why an infant should respond to “the frustration of a ‘dependent’ wish” by crying. Holding that crying is related intrinsically only to the experiences of hunger and pain, she concludes that “he responds to the lack of participation from the adult as to a complete interruption of the symbiosis, as if he were abandoned and hungry” (p. 402, my italics).

Since, however, Therese Benedek is not altogether confident that crying is to be understood as anxiety, and believes that anxiety proper is a response to the danger of ego disintegration, she advances another view. This is that the young child has to turn to his mother to preserve his ego integration when faced with the “anxiety, humiliation and shame of failure.” In the case of the older child, “his ego can maintain itself by its own resources” (pp. 408–409). As in the case of many other analysts, I believe the clinical data she presents are of more value than the theoretical interpretations she places on them.

Although Spitz is also an adherent of the secondary drive theory to account for the child’s tie and endorses Freud’s version of the Signal Anxiety theory of separation anxiety (1950), he advances, in addition, a new variant of that theory. This is a theory of ‘Narcissistic Trauma’. After outlining his views on the development of object relations from a phase of narcissism (first 3 months) through a phase of pre-objectal relations (second 3 months) to a phase of true object relations (third 3 months), he proceeds: “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. The reaction to it is just as severe.” From other passages, in which he insists on the warning function of anxiety and its dependence on learning and foresight, it is clear that in Spitz’s view anxiety is a signal to warn against the danger of a narcissistic trauma. This is a fresh variant of the Signal Anxiety theory: the traumatic situation to be avoided is, this time, one in which narcissism is threatened.

It should be noted that much of Spitz’s theorizing about anxiety turns around his concern to explain the anxiety exhibited when an infant of seven or eight months is confronted by a stranger, which he terms ‘8-month’ anxiety; the anxiety exhibited at separation from a loved object is less in his mind. In view of his empirical work this may seem surprising, until we realize that his observations of deprived infants were not concerned with the immediate responses to separation, namely anxiety and protest, but were largely concentrated on the later phases, grief and depression. As a result, it seems, he has overlooked like so many others the continuum from separation anxiety to grief and mourning.

In view of Sullivan’s insistence that psychiatry is the study of inter-personal relationships it is not unexpected that he sees all anxiety as a function of the child’s relationship with his mother and other significant people. Nevertheless his position is different from that I am advancing especially in the primacy which he gives to the role of learning; for he regards anxiety as being exclusively the product of the mother’s attitude. When the mother is approving the child is content, when she is disapproving the child is anxious. Despite his great emphasis on “need for contact”
and "need for tenderness" and the strong terms in which he refers to the experience of loneliness—"really intimidating" and "terrible" (1953, p. 261)—that separation from a loved object can of itself induce anxiety appears to be explicitly ruled out. Thus, in a final chapter, he indicates features that man has in common with other species, namely physiological needs and "even our recurrent need for contact with others". These he contrasts with features "restricted to Man and some of the creatures he has domesticated... which includes the experience of anxiety" (p. 370). His assumption that anxiety is confined to domesticated species follows from his assumption that it results from the processes of training and learning: "there is nothing I can conceive in the way of interpersonal action about which one could not be trained to be anxious" (pp. 370-371). Even "the experience of intense anxiety" which gives rise to repression is conceived as resulting from ill-conceived educational methods (p. 163).*

Although in Sullivan's view the induction of anxiety remains something of a mystery—"the character of situations which provoke anxiety is never completely to be grasped" (p. 190)—it is nevertheless evident that in effect he sees it as always connected with processes of child training. Since he believes that a main anxiety-inducing sanction used by the mother is restriction or denial of tenderness (p. 162), he comes at times near to the notion of separation anxiety. But that such a sanction can only be effective because anxiety results from lack of tenderness and from separation per se seems to escape him. There is, for instance, no reference to loneliness being a distressing experience in infancy; indeed he seems to be wholly unaware of it: "Loneliness, as an experience which has been so terrible that it practically baffles clear recall, is a phenomenon ordinarily encountered only in pre-adolescence and afterward" (p. 261 my italics).

Reading Sullivan's work one gets the impressions that he had never observed young children and that he was only partially aware of the close attachment they form to particular people and of the security that mere proximity to the loved object brings. The "need for contact with others, often felt as loneliness" is identified not with need for a genital or a parent-child relationship but with gregariousness in animals (p. 370): his conviction that "no action of the infant is consistently and frequently associated with the relief of anxiety" (p. 42), which overlooks the relief the infant commonly exhibits when clutching his mother, is a main plank in his theorizing. Because of this, he seems never to have grasped the reality of separation anxiety and, therefore, despite his close attention to the problems to which it gives rise, it remains almost impossible to attribute to him any particular theory of its nature and origin. It is probably for the same reasons that neither grief nor mourning play any significant part in his system of psychopathology.

In the theorizing of Phyllis Greenacre (1952) separation anxiety, grief and mourning seem also to be omitted. Instead, the possible role of experiences during the birth process and the first weeks of postnatal life are advanced as major variables to account for a later differential liability to neurosis.

*Dr. Mabel Blake Cohen has emphasized that Sullivan did not regard such 'training' as a product only of conscious parental attitudes: "Sullivan recognized that unconscious attitudes or tensions in the parents' interactions with the child were of considerably more importance than conscious planned behaviour" (personal communication).
I have already referred to Rank's views in regard to birth trauma. Fairbairn, who sees separation anxiety as the mainspring of all psychopathology, has followed him closely in regard to its origins: his postulate (Fairbairn, 1943), that birth anxiety is "the prototype of all the separation anxiety which is subsequently experienced", is the counterpart of his postulate that a return-to-womb craving accounts for the child's tie. It should be added, however, that these views are peripheral to Fairbairn's main theoretical position, which is in fact consistent with the theory of primary anxiety advanced here to account for separation anxiety. In no other respects does he follow Rank.

Others have also founded their psychopathology on the central role of separation anxiety and some have adopted the Primary Anxiety theory to account for it. For instance as long ago as 1935, Suttie, holding the view that the child's attachment to his mother is the result of a primary "need for company", saw anxiety as "an expression of apprehension or discomfort at the frustration, or threatened frustration, of this all-important motive". A year later Hermann (1936) expressed an almost identical view. He relates anxiety to the urge to seek and cling to mother: "Anxiety is basically the feeling of being left on one's own in the face of danger. Its expression is a seeking for help and at the same time a seeking for mother... Anxiety develops in the sense of an urge to cling..." Although he has never explicitly discussed separation anxiety, it is evident that Michael Balint subscribes to the views of his old Budapest colleague.

Odier (1948) appears also to adopt the same position, though his presentation is far less clear. Taking Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety as his starting point, he criticizes Freud's views on the ground that the infant in the second year cannot conceptualize danger. As an alternative he postulates that "during the second year this affect (i.e. anxiety) indicates that a particular state has become differentiated: the state of subjective insecurity", and concludes, "originally the cause of the insecurity of the infant is, above all else, the absence of the mother (or her substitute) or separation from her at the time when the infant most needs her care and protection. This state is the basic theory of anxiety as it relates to insecurity" (pp. 44-46). Sympathetic though I am to his thesis regarding the crucial importance of separation anxiety, I do not feel that in these formulations he has furthered our understanding of its nature. His view that separation anxiety starts only in the second year may have arisen because its obtrusive exhibition at this age misled him into supposing that it does not begin until then.

Winnicott makes no such mistake. Although in several papers (e.g. 1941, 1945, 1955) he might be thought to favour the view that separation anxiety is nothing but depressive anxiety, in a brief contribution (1952) he takes a line consistent with that favoured here. He refers to "the well-known observation that the earliest anxiety is related to being insecurely held" and to the anxiety which is caused by "failure in the technique of infant care, as for instance failure to give the continuous live support that belongs to mothering". In his judgment "it is normal for the infant to feel anxiety if there is a failure of infant care technique". This is also the view of William James who more than sixty years ago wrote simply: "The great source of terror in infancy is solitude" (James, 1890).
The Author's position

As I have already indicated this is also my view. It stems directly from my hypothesis that the child is bound to his mother by a number of instinctual response systems, each of which is primary and which together have high survival value (Bowlby, 1958). Soon after birth, it is held, conditions of isolation tend to activate crying and a little later tend to activate both clinging and following also; until he is in close proximity to his familiar mother-figure these instinctual response systems do not cease motivating him. Pending this outcome, it is suggested, his subjective experience is that of primary anxiety; when he is close to her it is one of comfort.

Such anxiety is not to be conceived merely as a ‘signal’ to warn against something worse (though it might subsequently come to have this function). Instead, it is thought of as an elemental experience and one which, if it reaches a certain degree of intensity, is linked directly with the onset of defence mechanisms. It is because of this, and because I wish to distinguish it sharply from states of anxiety dependent on foresight, that I have termed it Primary Anxiety.*

Although I believe states of primary anxiety due to separation to be some of the most frequent and pathogenic of such states, it is postulated that primary anxiety will arise in other circumstances also—perhaps whenever any instinctual response system is activated but not terminated. Primary anxiety due to separation seems likely, therefore, to be but one example of a common condition. It has, however, several special features. Not least of these is its specially close linkage in infants and young children to the experiences of fright and fear. When frightened, infants and young children look to their mother for security and if they fail to find her are doubly upset: both comfort and security are missing.

An hypothesis of this kind appears to have a number of advantages. It accounts for the well-known observations of anxiety in infancy and early childhood to which Freud drew attention, and also for the observations of very similar anxiety behaviour in lower primates. It lends itself to a number of extensions to account for separation anxiety of pathological degree and, finally, can without difficulty be related to a theory of grief and mourning. These are themes I have discussed in recent papers (Bowlby, 1960a, b).

SUMMARY

An examination of the literature shows that there are six main theories at present current to account for separation anxiety. These are the theories of Transformed Libido (Freud, 1905), Birth Trauma (Rank, 1924), Signal Anxiety (Freud, 1926), Depressive Anxiety (Klein, 1935), Persecutory Anxiety (Klein, 1934), and Primary Anxiety (James, 1890, Suttie, 1935 and Hermann, 1936). Whereas three of them (Birth Trauma, Signal Anxiety and Primary Anxiety) were developed explicitly to account for the observation that young children are anxious when their mothers leave them, the other three had different origins, and came only later to be applied to the data regarding separation anxiety. Elsewhere (Bowlby, 1960a) the author has given reasons why he believes the theory of Primary Anxiety to deserve more attention than it has hitherto been given.

*As explained in my previous paper (Bowlby, 1958) “the terms primary and secondary refer to whether the response is built-in and inherited or acquired through the process of learning”.

B
Acknowledgements—The author is much indebted to James Robertson for the observations on which he has drawn, and to Willi Hoffer for suggestions in revising this review of literature. The enquiry was undertaken as part of the work of the Tavistock Child Development Research Unit, which is supported by the National Health Service and by grants from the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, the Foundations Fund for Research in Psychiatry, and the Ford Foundation, to all of which our thanks are due. An advanced draft of the paper was prepared whilst the author held a Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California.

REFERENCES
FREUD, SIGMUND. Many of the references to the works of Sigmund Freud are given in the text (whenever possible to the Standard Edition), as well as being listed in the references.
(1905) Three Essays on Sexuality, S.E. 7.
(1910) Five Lectures on Psycho-Analytic, S.E. 11.
(1917a) Mourning and Melancholia, S.E. 14.
(1920) Beyond the Pleasure Principle, S.E. 18.
(1931) Female Sexuality, C.P. 5.
This document is a scanned copy of a printed document. No warranty is given about the accuracy of the copy. Users should refer to the original published version of the material.