

Anxiety 101

Chapter 4 – What are the Origins of Anxiety?

Zeldner & Matthews (2011)

Where Does Anxiety Come From?

- A sizable proportion of the population suffers from anxiety disorders
- Distal factors - biological givens and early environmental factors that impinge on children
- Proximal antecedents - specific to the stressful situation and more directly responsible for anxiety reactions in specific settings

Basic Issues

- Typically, psychologists are concerned with individual differences in trait anxiety
- In other words, is the child the father/mother to the man/woman?
- Focuses on developmental changes in anxiety

Temperament in Children

- Children can be observed in standard conditions, and behaviors observed and coded systematically
- Extraversion, negative emotionality, and effortful control are key
- [Temperament](#) is often seen as closer to basic biologically formed dispositions than personality

Rothbart (2009)

Longitudinal Research

- General conclusions are:
 1. First, there is continuity between childhood and adult personality
 2. Second, childhood temperament predicts adult personality, but the association is not very strong
 3. Third, personality becomes more stable as the person becomes older

Asendorpf (2008); Lewis (2001)

Stabilizing Personality

- As physical brain development ceases, the influence of genetic factors on personality becomes constant
- Adolescents and adults tend to gravitate toward environments that reinforce their personality characteristics
- People develop a stable identity and sense of self that filters through their life experience
- People tend to become more resilient with age

Asendorpf (2008)

Generational Effects

- Surprisingly strong association between a person’s date of birth and trait anxiety
- A later study confirmed a similar generational effect on clinical symptoms, as well as increased self-esteem in later generations
- Social disconnectedness to blame?

Twenge (2000); Twenge & Campbell, (2008)

Heredity & Environment

- Behavior genetics – collects data on individuals differing in kinship, investigates how similarity in trait anxiety varies with similarity in genes
- Molecular genetics—the aim is to find specific genes that vary across individuals (“polymorphisms”) that relate to anxiety

Arnold, Zai, & Richter(2004)



Behavior Genetics

Molecular Genetics

Behavior Genetic Studies

- Emphasize role of diathesis-stress models
- Anxiety influenced by the *interaction* of genes and environment
- Genes may also correlate or covary with environment

Molecular Genetics

- Studies have implicated the neurotransmitter serotonin (or 5-HT) in anxiety and depression
- There are two “alleles” of the gene, one long (l) and one short (s)
- Shorties tend to be more anxious, but is only a small part of variation in genetics

(Zuckerman, 2005)

Environmental Influences

- Roughly equal contributor to trait anxiety
- Consists of the shared and the unshared family environment
 - Unshared is actually most important!
- Another extrafamilial source of anxiety is the surrounding culture

Anxiety = Genes X Environment

- The environment functions via the learning mechanisms, including basic conditioning to threat and social modeling
- Genes and environment typically covary and interact, so that development reflects their joint influence, even at the level of brain development

How to Raise an Anxious Child

- Early childhood experiences play a major role in determining individual differences in trait anxiety
- Potentially important environmental factors:
 - Maternal uterine environment,
 - Family climate
 - Child-rearing patterns
 - Modeling
 - Specific conditioning episodes
 - Acute and chronic stressors

(Krohne, 1992; Rapee, 1997)

Prenatal Material Environment

- Antenatal maternal stress and anxiety (cortisol levels) are related to the child's anxiety
- May affect the development of fetal brain structures involved in arousal and emotion regulation
 - HPAC axis, limbic system, prefrontal cortex

Attachment Processes

- Bowlby's thought the child's mental health depended on forming a secure and stable attachment to the primary caregiver in infancy
- The "secure attachment" is characterized by warmth, intimacy, and stability, to the satisfaction of both mother and child

Bowlby (1960, 1969, 1979)

Attachment Processes

- *Secure* children remain calm during the separation seek proximity to mother when she returns
- *Anxious-avoidant* children distance themselves from the mother when she returns
- *Anxious-resistant* children react more expressively to separation with negative emotions (anxiety and anger)
- Tested using the [strange situations test](#)

Ainsworth et al. (1978)

Child-rearing Practices

- Two distinct dimensions of parenting may impact the development of anxiety
 - Acceptance and support versus rejection
 - Psychological granting of autonomy versus excessive psychological control
- Empirical studies have supported the view that parents of anxious children are overrestricting, more rejecting, and less intimate

Child-rearing Practices

- Strategies parents may employ to raise anxiety:
 - Be cold toward the child
 - Model anxious behaviors
 - Find fault with the child often
 - Give him or her no help in finding solutions to challenging problems

Anxiety & School

- Social evaluative situations in school contexts are more frequent and with higher stakes than practically anywhere else during childhood and early adolescence
- The most obvious source of anxiety is failure (or anticipated failure) in academic work

2x2 Model

- Mastery approach (I want to learn as much as I can from this class)
- Mastery avoidance (I am concerned that I am not smart enough to understand this class)
- Performance approach (I want to get the top grade in this class)
- Performance avoidance (I don't want to flunk this class)

Elliot (2005)

Classroom Climate

- Highly competitive and evaluative classrooms may foster an unhealthy orientation
- Students who don't perform well in these a) see themselves as failures and b) ruminate about their performance deficits rather than focusing on the task at hand

Church, Elliot, & Gable, (2001)

Evaluative Orientation

- Teacher's mode of evaluating performance impacts motivation and self-perception
- Children evaluated in terms of individual reference norms showed less fear of failure, more realistic goal setting, and less low-ability attribution

Boggiano & Ruble (1986)

History of Failure

- Children who succeed in tasks learn to approach new tasks as challenging and cope effectively with evaluative situations
- Children who have experienced continued failure in academic tasks will approach new tasks with considerable anxiety

(Hill & Eaton, 1977)


