

**Traumatic Moment,  
Basic Dangers and Annihilation Anxiety**

Marvin S. Hurvich, Ph.D.



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& Annihilation Anxiety



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# Contents

<i>ABSTRACT</i>	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
TRAUMATIC SITUATION AND DANGER SITUATION	3
VIEWS OF OTHER ANALYSTS ON ANNIHILA- TION ANXIETY	17
DISCUSSION	19
<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</i>	25
<i>REFERENCES</i>	26

## ABSTRACT

It is contended that the fear of being overwhelmed or annihilated is a correlate of Freud's traumatic moment, constitutes a basic danger, and should be included in the series of fear of loss of the object, loss of love, castration, and superego censure. Traumatic and signal anxiety are conceptualized as two points in a series of potential responses, and it is assumed that mental representations of the early state of helplessness (originally preverbal) can later be anticipated. Major implications of annihilation anxiety noted by Freud and later psychoanalysts are reviewed, and are found to reflect fears of disintegration of the ego and of the self. Though it has been cited many times, the concept is relatively undeveloped. Key factors which increase the likelihood of annihilation anxiety are identified as traumatic experiences, ego weaknesses, and threats to self-cohesion. The prevalence of annihilation anxieties at various levels of psychopathology, as compared with other anxiety contents, is reviewed.

# INTRODUCTION

This article concerns a form of anxiety that has been described by a number of psychoanalysts but has not received the systematic attention it merits. When acknowledged, it has most often been characterized as relevant to psychoses. But 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. The hypothesis is put forth that annihilation anxiety is a universal potential anxiety and that it is a frequent correlate and consequence of psychic trauma, ego weakness and pathology of the self. This article focuses on theoretical issues. I have previously reported on clinical manifestations (Hurvich, 1981) and on results from empirical assessments of the construct, both objective (Hurvich, 1987) and projective (Hurvich, Benveniste, Howard, & Coonerty, 1988). Future works will elaborate on these areas, and on more general treatment implications.

In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), Freud distinguished between traumatic anxiety and signal anxiety and concluded that they had different origins (pp. 141, 162). In the

same monograph, he also delineated a series of basic dangers related to anxiety. In this article, traumatic and signal anxieties are explored in relation to basic dangers. It is proposed that missing from the sequence of fear of loss of the object, loss of love, castration, and superego condemnation is the fear of being overwhelmed or annihilated (mortal danger), which can be seen as a correlate of the traumatic moment.



## TRAUMATIC SITUATION AND DANGER SITUATION

In the 1926 theory of anxiety, which he more succinctly summarized in 1933, Freud held that anxiety arises from two sources: as a direct result of being in a traumatic situation, and from the anticipation of being in a traumatic situation (1926, p. 162; 1933, pp. 94-95). By a traumatic situation Freud meant one in which the person is faced with a quantity of stimulation (inner and/or outer) that he or she cannot discharge or otherwise master. The experience is one of overwhelmed helplessness. Prior experiences of helplessness, Freud emphasized, constitute the prototype for a traumatic situation and characterize the circumstances of the infant at birth who is faced with unmasterable levels of stimulation. He held that a state of overwhelmed helplessness results from “a growing tension due to need” which the hungry infant is unable to alleviate by himself or herself. He postulated that one of the human organism’s first functions is to avoid overstimulation, initially by motor discharge. Three passages, from works published in 1917, 1923, and 1933, illustrate that Freud associated anxiety with the related fears of mortal danger, of being overwhelmed or annihilated, and of a traumatic experience. First, an excerpt from the *Introductory Lectures* (1917):

*We believe that in the case of the affect of anxiety we know what the early impression is which it repeats. We believe that it is in the act of birth that there comes about the combination of unpleasurable feelings, impulses of discharge and bodily sensation which has become the prototype of the effects of a mortal danger and has ever since been repeated by us as the state of anxiety (p. 396) Thus, anxiety recreates concerns of mortal danger, originally associated with massive unpleasurable bodily sensation from overstimulation during the birth process.*

Now, from *The Ego and the Id* (1923): “What it is that the ego fears from the external and from the libidinal danger cannot be specified; we know that the fear is of being overwhelmed or annihilated, but it cannot be grasped analytically” (p. 57). Note that Freud is making a close connection here between the fear of being overwhelmed and of being annihilated.

The third passage is a summary statement from *New Introductory Lectures* (1933):

*if we take in succession neurotic anxiety, realistic anxiety and the situation of danger, we arrive at this simple proposition: what is feared, what is the object of anxiety, is invariably the emergence of a traumatic moment, which cannot be dealt with by the normal rules of the pleasure principle, (p. 94)*

In these statements, Freud is saying that anxiety has biological roots (“cannot be grasped analytically”), the psychological manifestations of which are apprehensions of being overwhelmed or annihilated (mortal danger), and that such

anxieties are triggered when the person faces an amount of stimulation that he or she cannot discharge or master. This anxiety of the traumatic moment, of an overwhelmed state of helplessness, can be called annihilation anxiety, following Freud's 1923 statement as to what the ego fears.<sup>1</sup>

Freud discussed overwhelming in various places. In *Studies in Hysteria* (Breuer & Freud, 1893-1895), Freud said that when the ego is overwhelmed, it cannot perform its function of defense (p. 264). And in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940), 45 years later, he pointed out that the strength of the drives can destroy the ego's organization (p. 199). Thus, the ego's overwhelmed and helpless state can involve paralysis and/or disorganization of ego functioning.

Now what about the anxiety whose source is the anticipation of being in a traumatic situation (i.e., signal anxiety)? Freud called this a danger situation, and defined it as "a recognized, remembered, expected situation of helplessness" (1926, p. 166). He specified that the basic danger situations of early life include fears of loss of the object, of loss of love, of castration, and of superego disapproval.

But what happened to the danger of being overwhelmed? Is this not a basic danger? From Freud's description of the traumatic situation as one where the person feels helplessly overwhelmed, we can readily conclude that it constitutes a significant psychic danger. Indeed, Freud defined the traumatic moment as present danger, whereas a signal of anxiety only

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<sup>1</sup> Although fear and anxiety can be differentiated, the two terms are used interchangeably in this article. It is significant that although Freud distinguished between the two, he did not consistently maintain the distinctions in his writings (see Editor's footnote, Freud, 1920, S.E., 18, p. 13).

heralds potential danger. That traumatic anxiety constitutes a basic danger to the organism somehow was obscured by Freud's formulation of the dual view of anxiety. In traumatic anxiety, Freud was emphasizing massive, unwanted, painful affect, free of psychic content, that was automatically generated (i.e., without ego participation) as a result of the economic conditions (overwhelming stimulation). In signal anxiety, he was describing a purposeful, token affect, not generated by economic factors, which serves the function of anticipation.

Freud was also stressing the psychological significance of the child moving from a passive state of current overwhelmed helplessness to an active state of anticipating future danger that could be avoided. He saw traumatic anxiety as inexpedient in that it can paralyze all action and disorganize ego functioning, whereas signal anxiety is expedient because it can make the early recognition of danger possible.

But Freud's important distinction between the two manifestations of anxiety in no way challenges the point that a traumatic situation is a psychic danger to the organism. Both instances of anxiety have to do with a situation of helplessness, and Freud linked them in his assertion that signal anxiety is an anticipation of potential traumatic anxiety. Indeed, Freud described traumatic anxiety as corresponding to the original danger situation (1926, p. 141). Schur (1953) and Rangell (1968) also concluded that a traumatic situation is a danger to the organism.

The proposition that fears of being overwhelmed or annihilated constitute a basic danger fits best with a dimensional conception of anxiety. In this model, the anxiety in a traumatic situation and the anticipatory signal anxiety are conceptualized as the two poles of a series of potential responses. This proposal

is consistent with the formulation of anxiety as a developmental line (Yorke & Wiseberg, 1976). At one pole there is massive discharge of anxiety with somatic accompaniments, whereas at the other extreme there is a thoughtlike experience with only token affect, "a mere abortive beginning" (Freud, 1917, p. 395). Schur conceptualized anxiety as a series of reactions in his classic work *The Ego in Anxiety* (1953).

Freud believed he was unable to unify the two sources of anxiety (1926, p. 110), though both Schur (1953) and Rangell (1955, 1968) showed that Freud came closer to a reconciliation than he realized. The key problem for him was the contrast just described between what he saw as the automatic generation of anxiety in a traumatic situation, and the purposive character of the anxiety signal. He connected automatic anxiety with the actual neuroses, and signal anxiety with the psychoneuroses (1926, p. 141). Thus, in 1926, he saw overwhelming stimulation as automatically leading to anxiety. This is analogous to his earlier understanding of undischarged libidinal tension  $z$  s being automatically transformed into anxiety (Freud, 1895). In the 1926 theory, he still maintained that traumatic anxiety was substantially based upon economic considerations, and that anxiety could be engendered automatically following overstimulation. But he revised his views on the etiology of economically generated anxiety in a significant respect. He essentially discarded the libidinal transformation hypothesis, a key aspect of the earlier theory (Freud, 1926, pp. 109, 140, 163), though he still made some attempts to justify the conception (1926, pp. 110, 141). He decisively and unequivocally repudiated the notion of libidinal transformation in the 1933 summary of his views on anxiety: "We shall no longer maintain that it is the libido itself that is turned into anxiety" (p. 94). repudiated the

notion of libidinal transformation in the 1933 summary of his views on anxiety: “We shall no longer maintain that it is the libido itself that is turned into anxiety” (p. 94).

The revised theory held that when the degree of stimulation is too great to discharge or to bind, the resulting overwhelmed experience constitutes a traumatic moment that repeats an earlier state of helplessness, and that anxiety is automatically generated as a result of these economic conditions. Even though Freud jettisoned the libidinal transformation notion, he still held that the traumatic moment had a different origin from signal anxiety. As he concluded in 1926: “It will not be easy to reduce the two sources of anxiety to a single one . . . Non liquet” (it is not clear; p. 110). And he ended his 1933 discussion on anxiety in this way: “But I can see no objection to there being a twofold origin of anxiety—one as a direct consequence of the traumatic moment and the other as a signal threatening a repetition of such a moment” (pp. 94-95).

Later theorists attempted to unify the two sources. Rangell’s (1955, 1968) solution involved the assumption that the anxiety signal includes a minitraumatic experience, and that the traumatic state has signaling properties. Thus, there is some trauma in the signal, and some signal in the trauma. Brenner’s solution (1953) was to limit anxiety to the signal aspect, attempting to simplify Freud’s two sources of anxiety by discarding automatic anxiety, overwhelmed helplessness, and the traumatic moment. Schur suggested (1953) that anxiety is always the result of the ego’s evaluation of danger, rather than being an automatically generated phenomenon. His solution involved developmental considerations and posited a series of anxiety reactions. He pointed out that the increasing capacity for reality testing and its components (Hurvich, 1970) gradually allows the youngster

to anticipate, and to differentiate between a present danger and a potential danger. When potential danger can be limited to a thoughtlike awareness of danger, then controlled (i.e., signal) anxiety has replaced uncontrolled (i.e., traumatic) anxiety. Ego regression leading to a change in the balance between secondary and primary process thinking can temporarily or permanently reverse this achievement (Schur, 1953, pp. 72, 90).

But whether from two sources or one, it is reasonable to assume that whereas early in life overwhelming is experienced passively and preverbally, it can later be anticipated, and it may be associated with psychic content.<sup>2</sup>

This assumption is consistent with Freud's (1926) definition of a danger situation as "a recognized, remembered, expected situation of helplessness" (p. 166).

Based on the assumption that overwhelmed helplessness can at some point be anticipated, I believe it qualifies as a basic danger; indeed, as the first basic danger, of which the later dangers, beginning with the loss of the object, may be derivatives, and partial transformations. Support for this proposition can be found in Freud's 1926 monograph on anxiety. Here he described the fear of loss of the object as a displacement from the growing tension due to need onto the mother. What is subsequently feared is her absence, because her presence has become associated with reduction of the noxious overstimulation through her regularly gratifying the need.<sup>3</sup> As Freud put it:

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed elucidation of mental representation theories, nonverbal and verbal, and their interrelations, see Bucci (1985).

<sup>3</sup> Freud also assumed that the stimulus barrier, negative hallucinations, and autoerotic behavior in addition to gross motor discharge, protect the neonate against tension buildup.

*the content of the danger it fears is displaced from the economic situation on to the condition which determined that situation, viz., the loss of the object. It is the absence of the mother that is now the danger; and as soon as the danger arises the infant gives the signal of anxiety, before the dreaded economic situation has set in. (p. 138)*

In 1927, he expanded the formulation to include the mother as a protector against external dangers as well.

*In this way the mother, who satisfies the child's hunger, becomes its first love-object and certainly also its first protection against all the undefined dangers which threaten it in the external world—its first protection against anxiety, we may say. (p. 24)*

Thus, although he sees the mother as the child's major protection against danger, Freud does not see the fear of the mother's loss as the first danger. The fear of being overwhelmed or annihilated precedes, and is present during, the development of the fear of object loss. An additional quote (1926) underscores the point:

*But a moment's reflection takes us beyond this question of loss of object. 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 . . . It is this factor, then,*



*which is the real essence of the 'danger.'*<sup>4</sup> (p. 137)

Freud viewed the danger situations as reflecting a developmental series, with each danger relevant to a given stage of life.

*If we dwell on these situations of danger for a moment, we can say that in fact a particular determinant of anxiety . . . is allotted to every age of development as being appropriate to it. The danger of psychic helplessness fits the stage of the ego's early immaturity; the danger of loss of an object (or loss of love) fits the lack of self-sufficiency in the first years of childhood; the danger of being castrated fits the phallic phase; and finally fear of the super-ego, which assumes a special position, fits the period of latency. (1933, p. 88)*

This passage (see also Freud, 1926, p. 142) confirms that Freud considered psychic helplessness a basic danger in itself. During what he referred to as the ego's immaturity, Freud assumed that the organism is not yet capable of actively producing an anticipatory warning signal. At this early stage, the youngster is especially prone to traumatic overwhelming, and it is this overwhelmed state of helplessness that Freud assumed to be the essence of the original danger (1926, p. 141).

But is this anxiety? Some relevant considerations are: What are the relations between anxiety precursors and anxiety proper, and when does mentalized anxiety appear. There is substantial

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<sup>4</sup> It is of interest that writers in the "British School" tend to see loss of the mother as the most basic fear, but also tend to describe some version of annihilation anxiety.

agreement that the excitatory states of global displeasure and discomfort in the neonate do not qualify as mentalized anxiety. But Brody and Axelrad (1970), after a careful review of the available evidence, concluded that both anxiety precursors and anxiety proper are present before language attainment. We can say that Freud assumed the fear of object loss was present by at least 18 months, because the 18-month-old boy described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920) is attempting to master his mother's separation from him symbolically by turning passive into active (reeling a spool out and then drawing it back to him).

With regard to the question of how early an anxiety experience can reasonably be assumed to occur, Freud provided a basic assumption with regard to danger situations. He wrote that even though a given danger situation is appropriate to a particular period of life (and here he explicitly included the danger of psychic helplessness during the period of the ego's immaturity), "nevertheless, all these danger-situations and determinants of anxiety can persist side by side and cause the ego to react to them with anxiety at a period later than the appropriate one" (1926, p. 142). Thus, even if the experience of helplessness originally occurred prior to the time when a delineated, mentalized anxiety was possible, the earlier overwhelmed helplessness can serve as a basis for later anticipatory anxiety. Such a possibility is entirely consistent with Freud's formula that the defenses triggered in response to the anxiety signal forestall the re-experiencing of a traumatic moment of overwhelmed helplessness (1926, p. 166).

Regarding early anxiety and the mother's ability to protect her child against fright, Anna Freud wrote:

*Archaic anxiety, such as fear of being alone, fear of the dark, and loud noises, is a result of the initial immaturity and weakness of the childish ego, whose protective shield is still undeveloped, and this anxiety can never be entirely eliminated even by the most reliable maternal protection.*  
(1981, pp. 272-273)

Indeed, as Mahler (1952) pointed out, the mother herself tends to become a threat to the child's separate psychological existence as a result of the child's conflicted wish to re-merge with her, and such threats to one's separate psychological existence can trigger annihilation anxieties. Add to this the anxieties of 2 year olds resulting from the developmentally normal limitations of their psychic apparatus, where fantasy and reality are not reliably differentiated. At these times, when both fears of object loss and loss of love are well established, terrors of being devoured by animals, of being pursued by monster vacuum cleaners, of being sucked down the drain of a bathtub or toilet are commonplace and can occur in the presence of the mother (Fraiberg, 1959).<sup>5</sup>

But I would like to go one step further. The child not only is subject to annihilation anxieties both before and after developing the capacity for responding to object loss. The very experiences of object loss (including separation) and loss of love may be traumatic and accompanied by observable signs of overwhelmed helplessness and disorganization of ego processes. This is most especially true prior to the development of a level of object and selfconstancy which includes the functional capacity

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<sup>5</sup> During toilet training (second- and third-year), the fear of loss of the stool, which is part of the body self, is noteworthy.

to use positively toned internalized object representations to dispel abandonment feelings. Anna Freud wrote: “Loss of the care-taking object during the period of biological unity with the mother leads to fear of annihilation” (1965/1968b, p. 132). Schur (1953) stated that in the first months of life, the infant responds to danger as though it were a traumatic situation (p. 69). Waelder (1967) pointed out that early on the danger of loss of love threatens both the existence of the ego and libidinal satisfaction, while later it threatens only the latter (p. 27). In the same way, early sensations of being overwhelmed can be equivalent to feelings of annihilation, although later a differentiation can usually be made between the two.

With regard to disturbed children, Mahler said:

*It is my hypothesis that, in certain toddlers, the maturational spurt of locomotor and other autonomous ego functions, if it takes place concomitantly with a lag in their emotional readiness to function separately from the mother, produces organismic panic, the mental content of which is not readily discernable, because the child (still in the preverbal stage) cannot communicate. (1966/1979, p. 61)*

And again in 1968:

*As soon as ego differentiation and psychosexual development confront the child and thus challenge him with a measure of separation from and independence of the mother, the illusion of symbiotic omnipotence is threatened and severe panic reactions occur. These reactions usually manifest themselves during the third or*

*fourth year, or else at the height of the oedipal conflict, (p. 72)*

And finally: “Separation anxiety overwhelms the brittle ego of the symbiotic child. His anxiety reactions are so intense and so diffuse that they are reminiscent of the organismic distress of early infancy” (Mahler, 1968, p. 73).

Likewise, castration anxieties can trigger fears of annihilation. In some men, disappearance of the penis into the vagina during intercourse leads to fear of loss of the penis, which sets off fears of body dissolution (Greenacre, 1953, p. 28). Thus, although the assumption is made that fears of being overwhelmed or annihilated constitute the first basic danger, it is also assumed here that annihilation anxieties can be activated at later stages of development, and in relation to developmentally later danger situations.

To summarize, it has been shown that for Freud, fears of feeling overwhelmed and annihilated are closely connected. These fears, which are integral to Freud’s definition of a traumatic situation, constitute a basic danger to the child. With the addition of the assumption that the early fear associated with overwhelmed helplessness can be anticipated later, it has been maintained that overwhelmed helplessness fills all the requirements of a basic danger situation, namely, a recognized, remembered, expected situation of helplessness. References to Freud’s work of 1926 and 1933 demonstrated that he included the fear of overwhelmed helplessness among the basic dangers. It has been hypothesized that the fear of being helplessly overwhelmed or annihilated is a universal potential anxiety and that it underlies the other basic dangers and is sometimes triggered along with them. Examples were given of fears of

loss of the object activating fears of annihilation when these dangers are stimulated prior to the attainment of adequate object constancy. Because it is held that basic dangers can provoke anxiety at a time later than their original appearance (Freud, 1926), the question of when anxiety proper can first be experienced is not crucial to the argument.

## VIEWS OF OTHER ANALYSTS ON ANNIHILATION ANXIETY

Many other psychoanalysts have written about annihilation anxiety, including Klein (1932/1960, 1948/1975), Anna Freud (1936, 1951/1968a), Waelder (1936), Fenichel (1937/1954), Glover (1938/1956), Bak (1943), Sullivan (1949), Stern (1951, 1968), Jacobson (1954), Eissler (1955), Rangell (1955), Little (1958/1981), Brodsky (1959), Greenson (1959), Grotjahn (1960), Winnicott (1962/1965), Weiss (1964), Frosch (1967), Kohut (1971, 1977), Compton (1972), Pine (1974), Mayman (1978), Rothstein (1980, 1983), and Gediman (1983).

The major meanings of annihilation anxiety in the writings of these authors are the fears of ego disintegration, the loss of the self, the loss of identity and of personal characteristics, the loss of the object world, breakdown of self- and object representations, the loss of control over ego functions, the disintegration of the self, and the perception of deficit. As pointed out earlier, Freud described the effects of ego overwhelming in terms of paralysis of key ego functions and disintegration of the ego's characteristic organization. Writers following Freud, beginning with Waelder, Anna Freud, Winnicott, and Bak expanded the meaning to include loss of, and disintegration of, the self. Kohut's formulation of disintegration anxiety centers

on threats to the integrity of the self, whereas the concept being described in this article is also seen as triggered by disturbances in and threats to the various ego functions (Bellak, Hurvich, & Gediman, 1973). Kohut shed light on some key issues, including criteria for distinguishing his version of disintegration anxiety from castration anxiety (1977, p. 104).



## DISCUSSION

Because the previous section indicates that a number of psychoanalysts (classical, object relational, self psychological, and interpersonal) have written about annihilation anxieties, I wish to clarify the bases for the earlier statement that the concept has not received the systematic attention it deserves.

In spite of the numerous references, the concept is relatively undeveloped. For example, there is no comprehensive definition in the literature.<sup>6</sup> There is a paucity of in-depth discussions of the concept, or of its relationships with psychic trauma, hostility, depression, ego deficit, regression, transference, and countertransference. I have found no attempt to measure the construct (other than the Hurvich et al. references just cited), although hundreds of research reports have been published on psychoanalytic constructs, including anxiety.

There are indications that among Freudian psychoanalysts the concept has not been a favored one, and this may partly explain its unsystematic treatment. For example, Anna Freud,

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<sup>6</sup> Recently, Hurvich et al. (1988) specified nine related experiential groups of reactions which are often derivatives of underlying annihilation anxieties. These are fears of being overwhelmed, of merger, of disintegration, of impingement, of loss of needed support, of inability to cope, of loss of self-cohesion, of concern over survival, and of catastrophic mentality.

in her discussions with Sandler and others 35 years after the publication of *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (A. Freud, 1936), stated: “the idea I put forward wasn’t popular at all at that time—1 mean the idea of the ego’s concern for its own intactness” (Sandler & A. Freud, 1985, p. 277). One current psychoanalytic theorist explicitly excludes such fears from the basic danger series (Brenner, 1982, p. 67). Langs (1981) went further, maintaining that the overlooking of annihilation fears among classical psychoanalysts is defensively motivated:

*another constellation of motivations which, in general has eluded classical analysts . . . is comprised of the distinctly primitive anxieties, including the dread of annihilation . . . It seems likely that classical psychoanalytic theory and technique has been designed to some extent as a defense against such primitive anxieties, (p. 545)*

Another possible reason for the insufficient systematic treatment of annihilation anxiety is Freud’s (1915a) contention that one’s unconscious is in-capable of acknowledging one’s own death. This conclusion was based on the systematic characteristics Freud assigned to the unconscious (Freud, 1915b; e.g., the absence of negation and of the time dimension). But Freud’s own formulation of the structural model in 1923 left room for annihilation fears and death fears to be dynamically unconscious. For example, a conscious fear of annihilation may trigger signal anxiety, thereby activating defensive measures which could render the idea and its accompanying affect unconscious (Hoffman, 1979). Nevertheless, the earlier view concerning death fears and annihilation fears is still held today

by many psychoanalysts.<sup>7</sup>

Annihilation anxiety may be expressed as an imminent fear of being overwhelmed, of falling apart, dissolving, suffocating, going crazy, and the like. This article underscores the point that such complaints may be connected with concerns over the disintegration of the self-organization and/or the ego functions. It is also proposed that concern over ego intactness, reflected in annihilation anxieties, qualifies as a basic danger, along with fears of loss of the object, loss of love, castration, and superego censure.

Freud hypothesized (1926, p. 142) a close relationship between the dominant danger situation of childhood and the ensuing neurosis. If we expand the meaning of ensuing neurosis to ensuing psychopathology, then we can hypothesize the following:<sup>8</sup>

1. annihilation anxiety tends to be dominant in the psychoses
2. anxiety over object loss and loss of love tends to be central in borderline conditions
3. castration and superego anxieties and fears of loss of love are characteristic of neurotic conditions

At these different diagnostic levels, each and all of the basic dangers can nevertheless play a role. They may be interrelated in various ways, and may be interchangeable unconsciously. With regard to annihilation anxiety, it is more likely to be activated in an adult when any of the following are present, and the more of

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<sup>7</sup> Annihilation fears have to do with the present and near future, whereas death fears may relate to a more distant future (Eissler, 1955).

<sup>8</sup> Bergeret (cited in Stone, 1974/1980) suggested a similar schema.

these that are present, the more likely it is that the derivatives of annihilation anxieties will be found:

1. a history of traumatic life experiences
2. current traumatic events
3. significant ego weakness said deficits
4. a threat of loss of the sense of self
5. tendency for substantial ego regressions

These indicators underscore the hypothesis that the major bases for annihilation anxiety are ego weakness, threats to the integrity of the ego functions, and/or threats to the self organization. Early traumatic experiences can increase the likelihood of these weaknesses and deficits, which in turn increase the probability that annihilation anxieties will later be triggered. The susceptibility to ego regression and/or regression in the self-organization can result partly from previous experiences with overwhelming anxiety. In turn, the ego and/or self-regression can trigger annihilation anxiety because of the dedifferentiation of structures that occurs in their wake, although Kris (1936/1952) pointed out, adaptive regression is also possible.

In the psychotic, we find ego weaknesses in differentiation, internalizations that are unstable and overly negative, boundary fragility, and inadequate self- and object constancy. There is thus a danger of re-fusion of self- and object representations (either on a defensive basis or as a result of these ego weaknesses cited) in the face of strong sexual and aggressive drive upsurges (Frosch, 1967). The resultant concerns over ego and self-intactness trigger annihilation anxieties.

Within the borderline spectrum, vulnerabilities to annihila-

tion anxieties are common, though less extreme than in the psychoses. Thus, some borderline patients will periodically experience and attempt to defend against annihilation anxieties. Adler concluded (1985, p. 30) that the basic cause of anxiety in the borderline personality is a structural defect which can cause the individual to experience anticipated or actual abandonment as a threat to the sense of self—a threat of annihilation. As with children who have not established adequate self- and object constancy, the borderline patient will sometimes experience loss of the object and loss of love as psychic annihilation. To the extent that the particular borderline patient is subject to various ego function weaknesses or regressions, he or she is more vulnerable to the triggering of annihilation anxieties. Because patients with narcissistic character pathology are prone to threats to self-organization, they will be vulnerable to the anticipation of annihilation anxieties and, sometimes, to the severe anxiety that accompanies annihilation experiences.

In the neurotic range, where ego weaknesses, regressive potential, and earlier traumatic experience are all less severe, annihilation anxieties are more likely to occur during therapeutically induced regressions and as a result of adult onset psychic trauma. But in some neurotic analysands, derivatives of annihilation anxieties are associated with such childhood traumas as accidents, surgery, abuse, adoption, and deaths.

Thus, as a content of anxiety, fears of annihilation can be expressed without ego disruption and in the absence of a change in the usual state of consciousness (Rapaport, 1951). This has been found to hold for the neurotic patients just mentioned. In other patients, especially those with significant ego weaknesses, annihilation anxieties are associated with the regression of various ego functions and affects and the accompanying pathological

states of consciousness. The latter are manifested by a decrease in reflective awareness, a decrease in spontaneity and voluntary effort, and in thinking dominated by primary process. Aspects of such altered states of consciousness and other ego function regressions are found in a range of psychopathology, and are most dramatically seen in a patient's subjective experience of a panic attack (Hurvich, 1981).

A central thesis of this article has been that heightened concerns over survival associated with increases in annihilation anxieties are major sequelae of traumatic experiences. In psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, underlying anxieties of this kind often constitute a key factor in recalcitrant resistances. Of the many issues related to annihilation anxiety in need of further clarification, two relevant ones are origins and consequences. Regarding the former, central factors are traumatic experiences, structural weaknesses, and disruptive regressions. Apropos of the latter, one might examine the diagnostic, prognostic, and therapeutic implications of annihilation anxieties in particular personality configurations.

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