

John Bowlby Attachment and Loss, 1969

Separation and Anxiety

Chapter 17

Anger, Anxiety, and Attachment

Anger: a response to separation

Time and again in preceding chapters reference is made to the anger that is engendered towards a parent figure by a separation or a threat of separation. It is time now to consider this response more systematically and in particular how it is related to attachment and fear.

In the first chapter an account is given of the systematic study by Heinicke & Westheimer (1966) of ten children aged from thirteen to thirty-two months during and after a stay of two or more weeks in a residential nursery. When comparisons were made between the separated children and a contrast group of children who remained in their own homes the increased tendency of the separated children to respond aggressively was clear. For example, during their stay in the nursery a doll-play test was administered to the separated children on at least two occasions, at an interval of eight days; and the same tests were administered to the children in the contrast group at the same interval at home. On each occasion episodes of hostile behaviour occurred four times as frequently in the doll play of the separated children as they did in the play of the children living at home. Objects attacked tended to be the parent dolls. Of the separated children eight attacked a doll that had already been identified by the child as a mother or father doll; none of the children living at home did so.

Six weeks after the separated children had returned home, and after an equivalent period for the non-separated children, doll-play tests were again administered; and they were repeated ten weeks later. On neither of these occasions, however, were significant differences in hostility found between the children in the two groups. The reason for this was that, six weeks and more after reunion, the children who had been separated were no longer particularly aggressive in their play, a change for the better that was itself significant.

Nevertheless, it was apparent from mothers' reports that

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during the months after return home a number of the separated children were still behaving hostilely in the home, especially towards mother. During the period from the second to the twentieth week after reunion six of the ten separated children behaved towards mother with an intensity of ambivalence reported for none of the children who had remained in their own homes.

Other observers to have reported notably aggressive and, or destructive behaviour *during* a period of separation are Burlingham & Freud (1944), Robertson (1958b), Bowlby (1953), Ainsworth & Boston (1952), and also Heinicke in an earlier study (1956) in which he compared the behaviour of a small sample of children during a short stay in a residential nursery with that of a similar group starting to attend a day nursery.

Others to have noted intensely ambivalent behaviour *after* a child has returned home include Robertson (1958b), Robertson & Robertson (1971), and Moore (1969b; 1971).

Anger: functional and dysfunctional

Although sometimes the aggressive behaviour of a child who has experienced a separation appears to be directed towards all and sundry, often, as in the doll-play sessions mentioned above, it is plainly directed towards a parent or parent-substitute and is an expression of anger at the way he has been treated. Sometimes it is the anger of hope; sometimes the anger of despair.

On occasion a child's hostility to a parent takes the form of a reproach for his having been absent when wanted. For example, Robertson (1952) describes the angry reproaches of Laura, a child of two years and four months whom he had filmed during an eight-day stay in hospital for a minor operation. Some months after her return home Robertson was showing an early version of his film to her parents for their comments, while Laura was in bed believed asleep. As it happened, she awoke, crept into the room and witnessed the last few minutes of the film, in which she is seen on the day of her return from hospital, at first distressed and calling for her mother, later when her shoes are produced delighted at the prospect of going home and finally departing from hospital with her mother. The film over and the lights switched up, Laura turned away from her mother to be picked up by her father. Then, looking reproachfully at her mother, she demanded 'Where *was* you, Mummy? Where *was* you?' Similarly, Wolfenstein (1957), in her study of

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responses to disaster, relates how a small girl who had been apart from her father during a tornado, when reunited with him afterwards, hit him angrily and reproached him for having been away from her.

Both these little girls seemed to be acting on the assumption that parents should not be absent when their child is frightened and wants them there, and were hopeful that a forceful reminder would ensure that they would not err again.

In other cases a child's anger is the anger of despair. For example, in Chapter 1 there is a description (quoted from Burlingham & Freud 1944) of Reggie who was being cared for in the Hampstead Nurseries and who, by the age of two and a half years, had already had a number of mother figures. Then, two months later, the nurse to whom he was attached left to get married. Not only was Reggie 'lost and desperate' after her departure, but he refused to look at her when she visited him a fortnight later. During the evening after she had left he was heard to remark: 'My very own Mary-Ann! But I don't like her.'

In the case of Reggie we are dealing with a response, not to a single temporary separation, but to repeated prolonged separations each of which amounts to a loss. Although loss is the topic of our third volume, it is useful at this point to trespass briefly across the boundary.

In several papers (e.g. Bowlby 1960b; 1961b; 1963), the present writer has drawn attention to the frequency with which anger is aroused after a loss, not only in children but in adults also, and has raised the question of what its biological function might be. The answer proposed is that whenever separation is only temporary, which in the large majority of cases it is, it has the following two functions: first, it may assist in overcoming such obstacles as there may be to reunion; second, it may discourage the loved person from going away again.

Whenever loss is permanent, as it is after a bereavement, anger and aggressive behaviour are necessarily without function. The reason that they occur so often none the less, even after a death, is that during the early phases of grieving a bereaved person usually does not believe that the loss can really be permanent; he therefore continues to act as though it were still possible not only to find and recover the lost person but to reproach him for his actions. For the lost person is not infrequently held to be at least in part responsible for what has happened, in fact to have deserted. As a result, anger comes to be directed against the lost person, as well as, of course, against

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any others thought to have played a part in the loss or in some way to be obstructing reunion.

Further research on responses to bereavement supports this line of reasoning. In her study of the responses of children and adolescents to the death of a parent, Wolfenstein (1969) confirms that anger is extremely common, certainly in disturbed children, and endorses the view that it is linked to strong hopes of recovering the lost parent. Parkes (1971a) likewise in his study of the responses of widows to loss of husband finds anger to be common, though not universal. He also sees it as part of the bereaved's attempts to recover the lost person.

Thus, whenever a separation has proved to be temporary, and also whenever it is believed that a separation now in train will prove only temporary, anger with the absent figure is common. In its functional form anger is expressed as reproachful and punishing behaviour that has as its set-goals assisting a reunion and discouraging further separation. Therefore, although expressed towards the partner, such anger acts to promote, and not to disrupt, the bond.

Angry coercive behaviour, acting in the service of an affectional bond, is not uncommon. It is seen when a mother, whose child has run foolishly across the road, berates and punishes him with an anger born of fear. It is seen whenever a sexual partner berates the other for being or seeming to be disloyal. It is seen, again, in some families when a member becomes angry whenever his approaches to another member are met by an unresponsive silence (Heard 1973). It occurs also in non-human primates. For example, when he sights a predator a dominant male baboon may behave aggressively towards any wandering members of his own group who may be at risk. Frightened thereby, their attachment behaviour is aroused and they quickly come closer to him, so obtaining the protection inherent in proximity (Hall & DeVore 1965).

Dysfunctional Anger

Angry behaviour that has coercion as its function and is compatible with a close tie has tended to be neglected by clinicians. Very probably this is because it can so readily become dysfunctional and it is the dysfunctional forms that are usually met with clinically.

Dysfunctional anger occurs whenever a person, child or adult, becomes so intensely and/or persistently angry with his partner that the bond between them is weakened, instead of strength-

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ened, and the partner is alienated. Anger with a partner becomes dysfunctional also whenever aggressive thoughts or acts cross the narrow boundary between being deterrent and being revengeful. It is at this point, too, that feeling ceases to be the 'hot displeasure' of anger and may become, instead, the 'malice' of hatred.¹

Clinical experience suggests that the situations of separation and loss with which this work is concerned are especially liable to result in anger with an attachment figure that crosses the threshold of intensity and becomes dysfunctional. Separations, especially when prolonged or repeated, have a double effect. On the one hand, anger is aroused; on the other, love is attenuated. Thus not only may angry discontented behaviour alienate the attachment figure but, within the attached, a shift can occur in the balance of feeling. Instead of a strongly rooted affection laced occasionally with 'hot displeasure', such as develops in a child brought up by affectionate parents, there grows a deep-running resentment, held in check only partially by an anxious uncertain affection.

The most violently angry and dysfunctional responses of all, it seems probable, are elicited in children and adolescents who not only experience repeated separations but are constantly subjected to the threat of being abandoned. In Chapter 15 descriptions are given of the intense distress produced in young children by such threats, especially when the threats are given a cloak of verisimilitude. During the treatment of Mrs Q it seemed that nothing had caused her greater pain and distress than her mother's realistic threats either to abandon the family or to commit suicide. From experiencing such intense pain it is only a short step to feeling furiously angry with the person who inflicts it. It was in this light that the intensity of anger that Mrs Q felt at times towards her mother seemed most readily understood.

A similar conclusion was reached some years ago by Stott (1950), a British psychologist who lived for four years in an approved school studying the personalities and home backgrounds of 102 youths aged fifteen to eighteen years who had been sent there because of repeated offences. The information he gathered was derived from long interviews with the boys themselves and with their parents, and also from many informal contacts he had with the boys during their stay in the school. The boys, he found, were deeply insecure and their delinquencies

¹ Definitions given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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in many cases seemed to have been acts of bravado. Adverse parental attitudes and disrupted relationships were found to have been common, as is usual in such studies, and were thought to account for much of the boys' sense of insecurity. Nevertheless, what impressed Stott more than anything else was evidence that in many cases mother, and in a few cases father, had used threats to desert as a means of discipline and how intensely anxious and angry these threats had made the boys. Although Stott gives particulars of some typical cases, he expresses himself reluctant to give numbers, partly because it was only late in the inquiry that he realized how immensely important such threats probably are and partly because there were a number of cases in which he felt fairly confident that threats had played an important role despite the fact that their use in these cases had been strenuously denied by both boy and parents.

Stott draws attention to the combination of intense anxiety and intense conflict inevitably aroused by threats of this kind. For, while on the one hand a child is made furiously angry by a parent's threat to desert, on the other he dare not express that anger in case it makes the parent actually do so. This is a main reason, Stott suggests, why in these cases anger at a parent usually becomes repressed and is then directed at other targets. It is a reason also why a child or adolescent who is terrified of being deserted tends instead to complain of being afraid of something else, perhaps of the dark or of thunder or of an accident. In the next two chapters a shift of exactly this kind as regards the situation allegedly feared is held to explain the symptomatology of a large proportion of patients at present diagnosed as phobic.

It seems not unlikely that a number of individuals who become literally murderous towards a parent are to be understood as having become so in reaction to threats of desertion that have been repeated relentlessly over many years. For example, in an early paper that calls attention to the traumatic effects of separation, Kestenberg (1943)³ describes a girl of thirteen who had been deserted by her parents and who had been cared for by a succession of other people. She trusted no one and responded to any disappointment by some vengeful action. During the course of treatment this girl pictured herself as grown up and so able to revenge herself on her mother by killing her. Many analysts who have treated patients with this type of background could give similar examples.

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In another paper that also relates anger to separation, Burnham (1965) makes brief reference to two patients who actually engaged in matricide. One, an adolescent who murdered his mother, exclaimed afterwards 'I couldn't stand to have her leave me'. Another, a youth who placed a bomb in his mother's luggage as she boarded an airliner, explained 'I decided that she would never leave me again'. The hypothesis proposed makes these statements less paradoxical than they appear.

These admittedly are no more than clinical anecdotes, and no adequate history of previous family relationships is given for any case. Furthermore, so far as is known, no researcher since Stott has made a systematic study to test a possible causal link between violent anger directed towards an attachment figure and a history of being subjected by that figure to repeated threats of being abandoned. At present, therefore, the suggested link is hardly more than a conjecture; but as a lead for research it seems promising.

A Test for Appraising Responses to Separation

Psychoanalysts and others who adopt an object-relations approach have for many years regarded the balance of a person's disposition to love, to become angry with, and to hate his attachment figure as a principal criterion in making a clinical assessment. In recent years Hansburg (1972), by taking as his starting-point certain measures of how a person responds to separation, has begun to put this onto a more systematic footing.

The clinical test Hansburg is developing comprises a dozen pictures, all but three of which depict a situation in which either a child is leaving his parents or a parent is leaving his child. Some of the situations, such as a child leaving to go to school or mother leaving her child at bedtime, are of a kind that any child of over six would be expected to take in his stride. Others are of a more disturbing character. They include a picture in which the child's mother is being taken by ambulance to hospital, and another in which the child is going off to live permanently with his grandmother. Under each picture is written a title making explicit what the picture represents.

In its present form the test is suitable for children and young adolescents in the age-range ten to fifteen years. Hansburg reports that, despite the upsetting nature of some of the scenes, administering the test has not created difficulties. Should the test prove as useful as it promises to be, versions suitable for

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younger children and also for older adolescents and adults could readily be designed.

In presenting each picture the clinician asks the child being tested, first, 'Did this ever happen to you?' and then, if the answer is no, 'Can you imagine how it would feel if it did happen?' The child is then presented with a series of seventeen statements of how a child might be expected to feel in such a situation, and is invited to tick as many of them as he thinks would fit. Although for each picture the seventeen statements are phrased a little differently, the range of feelings described is similar. The following selection of eight statements illustrates part of the range of feeling covered:

- 'feeling alone and miserable'
- 'feeling sorry for his parents'
- 'feeling that he doesn't care what happens'
- 'feeling he will do his best to get along'
- 'feeling angry at somebody'
- 'feeling that, if he had been a good child, it would not have happened'
- 'feeling that his house will now be a scary place to live in'
- 'feeling that it is not really happening, it's only a dream'.

Preliminary findings show, among other things, that children growing up in stable families give two or three times as many responses that express distress and concern at what is happening as responses that express anger and blame. By contrast, disturbed children who have experienced long and/or repeated separations, many of whom come from rejecting families, give at least as many angry and fault-finding responses as they do responses expressing distress and concern. This very marked difference in the balance of responses is especially evident in respect of pictures that represent a major disruption of a child's bond with his parents; in respect of pictures that represent only a routine and transient separation the difference in balance is less evident.

Another interesting difference of balance, also seen especially in response to pictures representing a major disruption, is in the proportion of responses that indicate that the child will do his best to get along on his own or that he will be happier as a result of the event. While these form only a small minority of the responses given by children from stable homes, they are much in evidence in the responses of children who have experienced long and repeated separations or who come from

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unhappy homes. There is reason to believe that most such responses are expressions of a forced and premature attempt at autonomy that will prove brittle, a condition described by Winnicott (1955a) as a 'false self'. Some characteristics of persons who, by contrast, show a stable autonomy, and the conditions in which such autonomy develops, are the subject of Chapter 21.

Anger, ambivalence, and anxiety

In the schema proposed, a period of separation, and also threats of separation and other forms of rejection, are seen as arousing, in a child or adult, both anxious and angry behaviour. Each is directed towards the attachment figure: anxious attachment is to retain maximum accessibility to the attachment figure; anger is both a reproach at what has happened and a deterrent against its happening again. Thus, love, anxiety, and anger, and sometimes hatred, come to be aroused by one and the same person. As a result painful conflicts are inevitable.

That a single type of experience should arouse both anxiety and anger need cause no surprise. At the end of Chapter 8 it is pointed out that students of animal behaviour have observed that in certain situations either form of behaviour may be aroused and that whether an animal responds with attack or withdrawal, or with a combination of both, depends on a variety of factors that have the effect of tipping the balance either one way or the other. Between anxious attachment and angry attachment an analogous type of balance appears to obtain. A child who at one moment is furiously angry with a parent may at the next be seeking reassurance and comfort from that same parent. A similar sequence may be seen in lovers' quarrels. It is not by chance that the words 'anxiety' and 'anger' stem from the same root (Lewis 1967).¹

¹ It is of interest that in one of the reports of an infant chimpanzee brought up by humans this same mixture of anger and anxiety is described as occurring when separation threatens (Kellogg & Kellogg 1933). The authors, who adopted a female chimpanzee, Gua, at the age of seven months, discuss the nature of what are commonly described as 'temper tantrums', and the situations that elicit them. 'By far the most frequent occasion for the appearance of a tantrum', they report, 'was when she was left alone or when . . . it was momentarily impossible for her to get into the protecting arms of one of the experimenters. . . . In the more violent type of tantrum, such as that which resulted when we

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Psychoanalysts have for long been especially interested in the interrelationships of love, fear, and hate, since in clinical work it is common to find patients whose emotional problems seem to spring from a tendency to respond towards their attachment figure with a turbulent combination of all three: intense possessiveness, intense anxiety, and intense anger. Not infrequently vicious circles develop. An incident of separation or rejection arouses a person's hostility and leads to hostile thoughts and acts; while hostile thoughts and acts directed towards his attachment figure greatly increase his fear of being further rejected or even of losing his loved figure altogether.

To account for the intimate connections found between attachment, anxiety, and anger, a number of hypotheses have been advanced. Some are based on an assumption that the aggressive component is reactive to frustration of some kind; others hold that aggressive impulses well up within and find expression almost irrespective of what an individual's experience may be. Among leading analysts who have regarded ambivalence to a loved figure as a key issue in psychopathology and have proposed solutions, Fairbairn (1952) advocates a frustration-aggression type of hypothesis; while Melanie Klein (1932; 1948b) holds that all aggressive feeling and behaviour is an expression of a death instinct that wells up within and must be directed outwards.

Because of the great influence that Melanie Klein has had on many psychoanalysts and child psychotherapists we consider her views first.

The clinical phenomenon to which Klein drew especial attention during the 1920s and 1930s is that some children who are attached to mother with unusual intensity are, paradoxically, possessed of strong unconscious hostility also directed towards her. In their play they may express much violence towards a mother figure and then become concerned and anxious lest they have destroyed or alienated mother herself. Often after an outburst a child runs from the analytic room, not only for fear

ran away faster than Gua could follow, she seemed to become "blind with fear" and would utter a series of shrill vibrant screams. . . . She would then run almost at random and occasionally bump headlong into bushes or other obstacles. Ultimately she would fall to the ground, and grovel in the sand. In their discussion, the Kelloggs are in doubt whether to regard the tantrum as expressing rage or fear. Their account suggests that it contains elements of both.

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of consequences from the analyst, but also, it is suggested, to assure himself that mother is still alive and loving. Observations of this kind are now amply confirmed; and much other evidence demonstrates without doubt that the presence of hostile impulses, whether conscious or unconscious, directed towards a loved figure can greatly increase anxiety. (Witness Mrs Q's acute anxiety for her son's safety arising from her own impulses to throw the child out of the window, recounted in Chapter 15.) Thus the value of many of Klein's observations remains intact whether or not we accept her ideas in regard to the origin of anger and aggression.

It must, however, be remembered that just as hostility directed towards a loved figure can increase anxiety, so can being anxious, especially that an attachment figure may be inaccessible or unresponsive when wanted, increase hostility. It is of both great theoretical and great practical importance to determine how these vicious circles begin. Does increased anxiety precede increased hostility, is it the other way round, or do they spring from a common source? When looking backwards from data provided by a patient in analysis it is notoriously difficult to unravel the sequence, as Ernest Jones noted many years ago (Jones 1929); and this difficulty holds no less during the treatment of young children than it does for older patients. Neglect of this methodological difficulty and insufficient attention to family relationships have, it is held, led Klein to one-sided conclusions.

Logically it is clearly possible for intense anxiety to precede intense hostility in some cases, for the sequence to be reversed in others, and for them to spring from a single source and so be coincidental in yet a third group. Such possibilities, however, are not allowed for by Klein's formulation. Instead, her basic tenet is that increased anxiety is always both preceded by and caused by increased hostility; that anxiety may sometimes be independent of, sometimes itself provoke, and often be aroused by the same situation as, increased hostility is not conceded.

Fairbairn addresses himself to the same clinical problem as Klein but proposes a very different solution. In the absence of frustration, he holds, an infant would not direct aggression against his loved object. What leads him to do so is 'deprivation and frustration in his libidinal relationships—and more particularly . . . the trauma of separation from his mother' (Fairbairn 1952).

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The position consistently adopted by the present writer (e.g. Bowlby 1944; 1951; 1958a), and, as will already be apparent, adopted also in this work, is close to Fairbairn's.¹ Anger and hostility directed towards an attachment figure, whether by a child or an adult, can be understood best, it is held, as being in response to frustration. Frustration, it is true, can affect motivational systems of any kind. But there is reason to believe that the motivational systems with which this work is concerned, namely those mediating attachment behaviour, are those affected in a very large proportion of the most severe and persisting cases of frustration, especially when the agent of frustration is, wittingly or unwittingly, the attachment figure himself/herself.

The reason that anxiety about and hostility towards an attachment figure are so habitually found together, it is therefore concluded, is because both types of response are aroused by the same class of situation; and, to a lesser degree, because, once intensely aroused, each response tends to aggravate the other. As a result, following experiences of repeated separation or threats of separation, it is common for a person to develop intensely anxious and possessive attachment behaviour simultaneously with bitter anger directed against the attachment figure, and often to combine both with much anxious concern about the safety of that figure.²

Because of the tendency for anger and hostility directed towards a loved person to be repressed and/or redirected elsewhere (displaced), and also for anger to be attributed to others instead of to the self (projected), and for other reasons too, the pattern and balance of responses directed towards an attachment figure can become greatly distorted and tangled. Furthermore, because models of attachment figures and expectations about their behaviour are built up during the years of childhood and tend thenceforward to remain unchanged, the behaviour of a person today may be explicable in terms, not of his present situation, but of his experiences many years earlier.

¹ A principal point of difference is that in much of his work Fairbairn tends to identify attachment with feeding and orality and so to attribute proportionally greater significance to a child's first year or two than is attributed by the present writer.

² Frustrations of another kind that can engender much anger towards a parent occur when a parent demands that his (or her) child act as a caretaker to him (or her), thus, as noted above (p. 244), inverting the usual parent and child roles.

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It is, indeed, because of these complexities that the nature and origin of our feeling and behaviour are often so obscure, not only to others but to ourselves as well. These are all matters to be considered further in the third volume.

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