

Further Insights in the Etiology of Fear, Anxiety and Their Disorders in Children and Adolescents: The Partial Fulfillment of a Prophecy

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Although highly prevalent during childhood, symptoms of fear and anxiety are mostly short-lived and fairly mild. Initially, this led many child psychologists to the conclusion that fear and anxiety in children and adolescents should not be taken too seriously, and as a result these phenomena received relatively little research attention. During the past decade, this opinion has changed as researchers have increasingly demonstrated that a substantial minority of the youths do suffer from such high fear and anxiety levels that a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder is clearly warranted (e.g., Muris et al. 2000). In fact, epidemiological studies have shown that anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent forms of psychopathology among children and adolescents (Costello et al. 2003). Moreover, there is evidence indicating that a significant proportion of childhood anxiety disorders have a chronic course (Rapee et al. 2009).

The understanding that childhood fear and anxiety should be viewed as a clinically relevant phenomenon has led to a host of research on the pathogenesis of anxiety disorders in youths (Muris 2007). An analysis of the trends in publications on childhood anxiety disorders over the past 25 years (Muris and Broeren 2009) demonstrated that there has been a steady increase in research on the etiology of this type of psychopathology. In the discussion of their article, Muris and Broeren conclude that “even a greater amount of research can be expected in the near future” (p. 393). This special issue can be seen as the partial fulfillment of this prophecy. It includes eleven high-quality

papers of eminent research groups from all over the world (i.e., England, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States), which cover a series of topics that are illustrative for what is currently happening in the front line of research in this area.

Table 1 provides a brief overview of various studies. As can be seen, the papers in this special issue can be grouped in three categories, each referring to a specific etiological factor. The first category is concerned with individual difference variables of vulnerability to fear and anxiety problems in youths, and contains papers focusing on neuroticism and repetitive negative thought (Broeren, Muris, Bouwmeester, & Van der Heijden), behavioral inhibition and lack of attentional control (Sportel, Nauta, De Hullu, De Jong, & Hartman), and behavioral inhibition to the unfamiliar (Muris, Van Brakel, Arntz, & Schouten). The second category of papers pertains to family and parenting variables that are hypothesized to play a role in the origins and continuation of childhood anxiety disorders, such as anxious behavior of fathers (Bögels & Perotti), father and mother involvement during cognitive-behavioral therapy (Podell & Kendall), early learning experiences (Essau, Ishikawa, & Sasagawa), and ethnic pride and parenting (Gray, Carter, & Silverman). The third and final category of papers has to do with (the antecedents of) cognitive biases, which are generally thought to be involved in the maintenance of anxiety pathology in youths. This category includes studies on negative cognition in social anxiety (Miers, Blöte, & Westenberg), automatic avoidance tendencies in spider fear (Klein, Becker, & Rinck), maternal depression/panic symptoms and children’s separation anxiety-related interpretation bias (Perez-Olivas, Stevenson, & Hadwin), and parental threat cognitions and children’s interpretation bias and anxiety (Creswell, Shildrick, & Field).

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Table 1 Overview of studies included in this special issue on childhood fear and anxiety

Study	Etiological factor	Category	Fear/anxiety phenomenon	Sample
1. Broeren et al.	Neuroticism and repetitive negative thought	Individual differences	Anxiety (depression, sleep difficulties)	Non-clinical, $N = 158$, 8–13 years
2. Sportel et al.	Behavioral inhibition and lack of attentional control	Individual differences	Anxiety (depression)	Non-clinical, $N = 1806$, young adolescents
3. Muris et al.	Behavioral inhibition to the unfamiliar	Individual differences	Anxiety (other psychopathology)	Non-clinical, $N = 261$, 5–8 years
4. Bögels & Perotti	Anxious behavior of fathers	Family	Social anxiety	None, review
5. Podell & Kendall	Father and mother involvement during therapy	Family	Anxiety disorders	Clinical, $N = 45$, 9–13 years
6. Essau et al.	Early learning experiences	Family	Anxiety	Non-clinical, $N = 299$, 12–17 years
7. Gray et al.	Ethnic pride and parenting	Family	Anxiety sensitivity, anxiety	Non-clinical, $N = 266$, 8–13 years
8. Miers et al.	Negative social cognition	Cognitive bias	Social anxiety	None, review
9. Klein et al.	Automatic avoidance	Cognitive bias	Spider fear	Non-clinical, $N = 195$, 9–12 years
10. Perez-Olivas et al.	Maternal depression and panic symptoms	Cognitive bias	Interpretation bias, anxiety	Non-clinical, $N = 60$, 7–14 years
11. Creswell et al.	Parental threat and distress cognitions	Cognitive bias	Interpretation bias, anxiety	Non-clinical, $N = 110$, 5–9 years

All these studies add further insights in the pathogenesis of anxiety problems in youths, and also provide new leads for future work in this intriguing domain of research. I thank the authors for submitting their outstanding contributions and their patience during the review process. Finally, I acknowledge the Editor-in-chief Nirbay Singh for offering me the opportunity to edit this special issue for the *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. As this issue nicely illustrates, both *child* and *family* factors should be considered when trying to understand the origins of anxiety pathology in youths, and as such I am pretty convinced that this series of papers will be of interest to the readership of the journal.

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