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# THE ETIOLOGY OF PHOBIAS: A NONASSOCIATIVE ACCOUNT

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**ABSTRACT.** *Theories of the origin and maintenance of fears and phobias have had a profound influence on the kinds of treatments employed in the phobic disorders. In view of this influence, the present review considers the considerable controversy surrounding the major etiological models. First, the various forms of the associative learning account are examined. It is argued that each of these approaches has failed to provide a comprehensive account of the onset of the phobic disorders. Second, evidence for a nonassociative account is considered. It is argued that this latter model can more adequately account for the majority of experimental and clinical findings in most phobic conditions. Future directions for research on the etiology of phobias are discussed.*

INCREASINGLY, clinicians and researchers alike are recognising the need to collect information about the origins of phobic cases as a standard part of initial assessment. This information enables the researcher to evaluate the relevance of the various theoretical approaches, and may provide useful data for the clinician who must choose an appropriate treatment strategy. It has been argued that different modes of onset may lead to different individual response patterns and result in differential response to standard treatments (Rachman, 1977). Thus, theories of the origin and maintenance of fears and phobias continue to have a profound influence on the kinds of treatments employed with phobic patients. It is largely in view of this influence that the present paper focuses on the major etiological accounts, beginning with a review of the traditional conditioning model and the psychoanalytic account that it sought to replace.

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### THE CLASSICAL CONDITIONING ACCOUNT

Though proposed as early as 1917, the Pavlovian model of phobic reactions was not to become the dominant etiological account until well after the Second World War. It was not until publication of Wolpe and Rachman's (1960) classic critique of Freud's famous case study, "Little Hans," that the conditioning account was to take centre stage. As many have subsequently argued, the Wolpe and Rachman (1960) paper represents as clearheaded a critique of the looseness of analytic inference and argument as exists in the literature (Seligman, 1971). Its influence on the growth of interest and acceptance of the conditioning model, and the demise of the analytic account, cannot be overestimated.

Freud had argued that Hans' fear of horses, like all phobias, was due to repressed sexual wishes. According to Freud (1909), due to naturally occurring Oedipal strivings for his mother, Hans wished to replace his father, whom he hated as a rival, and then sleep with his mother. Freud (1909) states that, "Hans really was a little Oedipus who wanted to have his father 'out of the way', to get rid of him, so that he might be alone with his beautiful mother and sleep with her" (p. 269). His Oedipal desires and his rivalrous aggression toward his father were repressed as unacceptable forces to his ego. The anxiety related to his father, involving a fear of retribution in the form of castration, was alleviated by its displacement onto horses, animals which had become associatively linked with his conflict and therefore symbolic of his father. Hans' fear of walking on the streets, where horses were to be found, provided a means for him to stay at home with his mother. Finally, instead of killing his father, Hans resolved his Oedipal conflict by promoting his father to a marriage with his grandmother in a game, thus removing the rival.

That a plausible learning-based alternative to the psychoanalytic view of Hans' fear existed was made more than clear by Wolpe and Rachman (1960) in their classic rejoinder. They reported that in the 140-page description of the case, they could find no direct evidence of Hans' wish to sleep with his mother, nor of his hatred or fear of his father. Indeed, Hans had expressly denied both these emotions. Similarly, they found no satisfactory evidence for the supposed relationship between horses and Hans' father. Evidence for this relationship had been based on Hans' fear of "what horses wear in front of their eyes and the black around their mouths" (Freud, 1909, p. 211), which had been interpreted by Freud as the transposed eyeglasses and moustache of his father. However, Wolpe and Rachman point out that such an interpretation is seriously undermined by Hans' later revelation that he had meant blinkers and muzzles, respectively. Finally, they argued that Freud's claim that the purpose of Hans' "agoraphobic" behaviour was simply to keep him near his mother failed to account for the fact that Hans also experienced anxiety when he was out walking with his mother.

With their attack on the Freudian account complete, Wolpe and Rachman (1960) went on to provide an alternative account of Hans' phobic behaviour. They noticed that prior to onset of Hans' concerns, he had suffered a traumatic experience involving horses. Hans had been startled by an accident in which a horse pulling a bus had fallen. By his own account, the event had caused him great distress. Furthermore, as confirmed by his mother, his fear of horses had broken out immediately afterwards. Unlike Freud, Wolpe and Rachman saw the complete cause of Hans' disorder in this event, arguing that his phobic concerns, and all phobias, were due to traumatic Pavlovian conditioning. In the basic Pavlovian case, a neutral stimulus (the conditioned stimulus or CS) may acquire the capacity to elicit fear (the conditioned response or CR) if it occurs in contiguity with a second stimulus (the unconditioned

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