

A ROUTE THROUGH THE ANGUISH IN FREUD'S WORK¹

UM PERCURSO PELA ANGÚSTIA NA OBRA DE FREUD

UM RECORRIDO POR LA ANGUSTIA EN LA OBRA DE FREUD

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a journey through the main texts of Sigmund Freud that have anguish as their central theme. Since the beginning of his work, this was a subject addressed by Freud. Initially, anguish appeared directly related to the current neuroses, starting point for a first theory of anguish, in which it was considered the result of an unloaded sexual excitement. As the years went by, the approaches to anguish changed, culminating in a second theory of anguish, presented in the famous text “Inhibition, Symptom and Anguish” of 1926. The objective of this work is to present, in a bibliographical review, Freud's journey regarding the theories on anguish and the main concepts that are articulated to it.

KEYWORDS: Anguish. Sigmund Freud. Sexual.

RESUMO: Este artigo apresenta um trajeto pelos principais textos de Sigmund Freud que têm como tema central a angústia. Desde o início de sua obra, este era um assunto abordado por Freud. Inicialmente, a angústia aparecia relacionada diretamente às neuroses atuais, ponto de partida para uma primeira teoria da angústia, em que esta era considerada resultado de uma excitação sexual não descarregada. Com o passar dos anos, as abordagens em relação à angústia se modificam, culminando em uma segunda teoria da angústia, apresentada no famoso texto “Inibição, Sintoma e Angústia”, de 1926. O objetivo deste trabalho, é expor em revisão bibliográfica, o percurso feito por Freud a respeito das teorias sobre a angústia e os principais conceitos que se articulam a ela.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Angústia. Sigmund Freud. Sexual.

RESUMEN: Este artículo presenta un recorrido por los principales textos de Sigmund Freud cuyo tema central es la angustia. Desde el inicio de su obra, este fue un tema abordado por Freud. Inicialmente, la angustia ha aparecido directamente relacionada con las neurosis actuales, punto de partida para una primera teoría de la angustia, en la que se consideraba el resultado de una excitación sexual no descargada. A lo largo de los años, los enfoques de

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la angustia han cambiado, culminando en una segunda teoría de la angustia, presentada en el famoso texto “Inhibición, síntoma y angustia”, de 1926. El objetivo de este trabajo es exponer la revisión bibliográfica, el camino recorrido por Freud en cuanto a las teorías sobre la angustia y los principales conceptos que se vinculan a ella.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Angustia. Sigmund Freud. Sexual.*

Introduction

This paper aims to go through the main elaborations regarding the anguish in Freudian work. The subject of anguish was approached by Freud, from his initial texts to the end of his writings, based upon two theories, which mark two distinct moments of his work. The first theory is essentially an economic approach, that is, it refers to a great amount of sexual energy that invaded the subject as a result of unsatisfactory coitus. Then, at this moment, anguish is considered as an intense affection of displeasure, strictly linked to sexuality. In his second theory, Freud makes a distinction between two types of anguish: signal and automatic. The first is the response of the self to the threat of a traumatic situation, which is seen as danger; situations of danger change throughout life, but are always related to a situation of helplessness insofar as it involves the separation or loss of a loved object. The second concerns a response of the self to the threat of a traumatic situation, in which the self is in a state of helplessness, lacking the means to deal with an excitement.

The first theory of anguish

Freud, in 1894, while writing the *Studies on Hysteria* – in partnership with Breuer – was also, as can be read in the letters to Fliess – completely engaged in the investigation of the problems of neuroses: the “current neuroses” and the “psychoneuroses”. It was here that defense theory was discussed at length for the first time. The importance of the role played by sexuality is beginning to emerge, as well as the idea of the division of the mind into different systems: conscious and unconscious.

The main difference between current neuroses and psychoneuroses can be established by means of an etiology, while current neuroses were viewed as a consequence of chemical interference, an impediment to current sexual satisfaction, psychoneuroses were viewed as a consequence of psychic intermediation, fixations and deviations of the libido in childhood.

Freud (1894) states that in all the cases analyzed by him in the obsessive neurosis, it was the subject's sexual life that aroused an affectionate affection, sometimes of the same

nature as that linked to his obsession. However, on the one hand, not everyone who suffers has such a clear idea about the origin of their suffering, while patients who are aware of the sexual origin of their obsessions or even of their sufferings, in turn, keep them secret. When they complain about their obsessions, they are astonished that they are subject to the affection in question, that they feel anguish. Freud also reiterates that for the experienced doctor it is the contrary, affection appears justified and understandable, what he finds remarkable is only that such affection is linked to a representation which does not deserve it (FREUD, 1894, p. 60).

In some cases, the liberated anguish, whose origin should not be remembered by the patient, will seize the primary phobias, common to the human species, related to animals, storms, darkness and so on. In choosing the transposition of affection as a method of defense, the “self” takes much less advantage than choosing the hysterical conversion of psychic excitement.

The neurosis of anguish will compose the picture of the so-called current neuroses, next to neurasthenia and hypochondria, so called because they are related to the subject's current sexual life. In these cases, Freud (1894) supposes that there would be an accumulation of excitement without connection with a psychic origin, that is, these neuroses would be the result of problems resulting from the subject's sexual dissatisfaction. Such neuroses present two forms of emergency: attacks of anguish and a chronic state, milder and with fluctuating appearance. The Freudian description of this neurotic modality is very similar to the current anxiety disorders, which include panic attacks and generalized anxiety.

From a clinical point of view, the anguish neurosis described by Freud has much more closely related symptoms, unlike what occurs in genuine neurasthenia, where the etiology and mechanisms are different. All the symptoms of anguish neurosis can be grouped around a main axis, which is the anguish itself. Among the more general symptoms appear general irritability, distressed expectation, attacks of distress and waking up in panic at night.

It is worth noting that in some cases of anguish neurosis, no etiology is found, there is rarely a difficulty in establishing themselves as a hereditary factor.

Freud states:

when there are grounds to consider neurosis as acquired, a careful investigation in this sense reveals that a set of disorders and influences of sex life are the acting etiological factors (FREUD, 1895, p. 98, our translation).

According to Freud (1895), it is recommended to consider the incidence of anguish neurosis separately, between men and women. Thus, in women it can occur: virginal distress or distress in adolescents; distress in newlyweds; distress in women who suffer from premature ejaculation; distress in widows or abstinent persons; distress in the climacteric period. In men, their groups have analogies in women: anguish in men who voluntarily abstain; anguish in a state of unconsumed excitement; anguish in interrupted coitus; anguish in senescent men.

Initially, Freud had a suspicion that it was an accumulation of excitement, and that it would not be possible for him to obtain clinical symptoms of psychic origin classic to neurosis. Hysteria or a traumatic neurosis can be acquired, but not the neurosis of distress. While neurasthenia arises whenever the proper discharge is replaced by a less proper one, the anguish neurosis, in turn, is the product of all factors that prevent somatic sexual arousal from being psychically elaborated.

According to Freud:

The psyche is invaded by the affection of anguish when it feels incapable, through an appropriate reaction, of dealing with a task (a danger) from the outside; and is trapped inside a neurosis of anguish when it perceives itself incapable of balancing the (sexual) excitement from within – in other words, it behaves as if it has projected such excitement out [. ...] Affection is a state that passes quickly, while neurosis is a chronic state, because while exogenous excitement acts in a single impact, endogenous excitement acts as a constant force (FREUD, 1984, p. 109, our translation).

In 1916, Freud dedicated a whole conference to Anguish, because, according to him, questions related to the subject were not clarified in his last conference about the neurotic state, since he had not worked the anguish itself. It is a symptom that all neurotics complain about as the worst suffering, which can end up resulting in attitudes considered crazy! With this, Freud comes to think that neurotics feel the anguish much more intensely than other people.

According to Freud (1916), two types of anguish can be experienced: the realistic and the neurotic. He defines realistic anguish as something more rational, a state of self-preservation, a reflex of escape from an external danger. It is related to the knowledge of the person, which makes it possible to recognize the danger at an early stage.

If we stop to analyze, the realistic anguish, in a way, becomes advantageous, because it can provide us with an "alert" to the danger that may be before us. It manages, during chaos, to find the best way out of that situation. But when this anguish is exacerbated, it becomes the

danger, because during the moment of escape, it can paralyze the subject. Thus, Freud concludes that the generation of anguish is never appropriate! Because we don't know what the reaction will be during a certain moment.

The emergence of anguish can be equated with affection. But what would be an affection? In questioning himself, Freud (1916) says that the essence of an affection goes far beyond innervations or motor discharges. His hypothesis is that an affective state would be formed in the same way as a hysterical attack, and so this hysterical attack can be equated with a newly formed individual affection and a normal affection, the expression of a general hysteria that has become an inheritance.

In this way, the affection of anguish is the original experience of the act of birth that is being repeated, for it is in this that there are unpleasant sensations, impulses of discharge and bodily sensations. The act of birth has become a prototype of a "mortal danger", which is repeated by us as the state of anguish.

If we stop now to think about the neurotic anguish, how it manifests itself, what new forms are presented in it? It appears through an apprehension, a floating anguish. It is ready to connect to an idea that is appropriate for that purpose. Freud called this kind of anguish expectant.

People tormented by expectant anguish always interpret events, even casual ones, as an omen of evil and explore uncertainties in a bad way. These characteristics are easily found in people who say they are just super anxious or pessimistic, but Freud includes in cases of 'neurosis of anguish'.

The second form of anguish, pointed out by Freud (1916), as opposed to the one mentioned above, is linked to certain objects and situations. It is the anguish of phobias, divided into three groups. The first group is related to objects; the second group, to situations; and the third group, to animals. The anguish present in the phobias of neurotics is overwhelming, what seems strange is not the content, but the intensity in which it presents itself. Moreover, all these phobias can be classified as hysteria of anguish, that is, a disorder related to conversion hysteria.

The third form of anguish, called neurotic anguish, has no relation with a threatening danger, it completely escapes the perception built up until now. Freud uses as an example the case of hysteria, which, in some situation of excitement is expected some manifestation of affection, but never anguish. Thus, Freud says:

Here there is no sign of danger or of any cause that could be seen as a danger. And we soon verify, from these spontaneous attacks, that the complex we describe as an anxiety state is susceptible to fractionation. The total attack may be represented by a single symptom, intensely developed [...] So, these conditions that we describe as 'anguish equivalents' must be equal to the anguish for all clinical and etiological purposes (FREUD, 1916, p. 467, our translation).

However, even if questions arise about how one can understand neurotic anguish, Freud still leans toward the expectation that where there is anguish, there must be something to fear.

The expectant anguish depends exactly on some events of the sexual life or usage of the libido. As previously described, the anguish is related to the first theory of libido.

In psychoneuroses, anguish almost always appears as a form of symptom, but it is also possible to arise unrelated anguish, which manifests itself as a chronic condition. After the recalculation there is the dislocation of the idea and the transformation of affection into anguish. On the other hand, those who suffer from obsessive acts, the so-called rituals seem to be free of anguish. However, when they are prevented from performing them, or when they try not to perform them anymore, they are submitted to a terrible anguish to perform the compulsion. Thus, Freud says that anguish has always been present, but was covered by the obsessive act. And this also happens in hysteria, and the result of the repression is anguish.

After these observations about psychoneurosis, Freud concludes a connection he was seeking:

[...] as our starting point the opposition that we so often claim to exist, between ego and libido. As we know, the generation of anguish is the reaction of the ego to danger and the sign to undertake escape. Thus, it seems plausible to suppose that, in neurotic anguish, the ego makes a similar attempt to escape to demand made by its libido, that the ego treats this internal danger as if it were an external danger. Therefore, this corresponds to our expectation that where anguish manifests, there is something to be feared. Just as the attempt to escape from an external danger is replaced by the adoption of a firm attitude and appropriate measures of defense, so the generation of neurotic anguish gives way to the formation of symptoms, and this results in the anguish being linked (FREUD, 1916, p. 471, our translation).

Anguish is an escape from the "self" away from its own libido, but this is something contradictory to say, because the libido cannot be put in contrast with the person himself, as something external. With this, another question arises regarding the topography of anguish and to think about solving this question, Freud returns to the genesis of anguish in children and the origin of the neurotic anguish linked to phobias.

A child often has a state of apprehension and it is difficult to distinguish whether it is a realistic or neurotic anguish. In early childhood the child fears strangers, but the child does not fear these strangers because they associate them with bad intentions. For Freud (1916), the child is afraid of strangers because it is used to familiar figures – its mother. The child's longing for its mother turns into anguish – the child's libido cannot stay suspended and is discharged in the form of anguish.

In cases of phobia, the former is related to situations of darkness or loneliness. Here also both are related to the child feeling the absence of some loved one who takes care of it – its mother. In all cases that can later become a factor for phobia, children do not show anguish and the greater their ignorance, the less their anguish.

According to Freud:

childhood anguish has little relation with realistic anguish, but on the other hand, it is closely related to the neurotic anguish of adults. Like this, it is derived from the unused libido and replaces the absent object of love with an external object, or a situation (FREUD, 1916, p. 476, our translation).

Just as in the anguish of children, in phobia the unused libido is transformed into anguish that appears to be realistic, an insignificant external danger is introduced to represent the demands of the libido. Every “hysteria of anguish”, goes back to a child's anguish and is a continuation of it, even if it has a different content and receives another name.

Thus, in the first theory of distress, the transformation into distress is the immediate fate of the libido when there is recalculation. But this is not the only and not the definitive destiny of this libido, for in neuroses there are processes that seek to bind anguish. In phobias, it can be divided into two phases. The first phase, the repression and transfer of libido in distress, which is linked to an external danger. The second phase refers to taking precautions and guarantees, through which all contact with this danger can be avoided, which is treated as an external thing that is.

Articulations between anguish and *Unheimlich*

On the way to better understand the anguish in Freud, another important text is “The Stranger” of 1919. We cannot say that it is a text whose main theme is anguish, but it is in it that Freud makes important discoveries on the theme and articulates the "strange" with anguish.

Written in parallel with “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” of 1920, this Freudian text discusses the theme of the “stranger”, usually associated with something frightening, which causes fear and horror. Freud initially proposes to analyze the meanings of the word *Stranger* – *Unheimlich* in the original in German, which means non-domesticated, unfamiliar, strange – and its opposite word *Heimlich* – domesticated, home, native. Freud's great discovery is that between the different meanings of the word *Heimlich*, a meaning has developed in which it is identical to its opposite, *Unheimlich*.

Shelling (*apud* FREUD, [1919] 1990, p. 281, our translation) defines the word *Unheimlich* as “all that should have remained secret and hidden but came to light”. Freud makes an association with the unconscious, that is, everything that was outside the consciousness and that through dreams, jokes, failed acts, came to light.

To exemplify this subject better, Freud uses the story of The Sandman - a frightening character who comes to tear the eyes out of children who don't want to sleep. This fear of the child having its eyes plucked out, Freud says that it is often a substitute for the fear of being castrated, which has been perceived through dreams, fantasies and myths. In the tale, it is possible to highlight characters that are considered identical, at which point Freud talks about the phenomenon of the double, another source of the feeling of strangeness. The phenomenon of the “double” addressed by Otto Rank (*apud* FREUD, [1919] 1914) is when the subject identifies with another person, in such an intense way, that it questions who itself is, there is an interchange of the self. According to him, the “double” has connections with reflections in mirrors, with shadows, with spirits.

According to Freud:

[...] we must admit, none of this helps us to understand the extraordinarily intense sensation of something strange that permeates conception; and our knowledge of pathological mental processes allows us to add that nothing in this more superficial material could be taken into account in the eagerness for defense that led the ego to project out that material, as something strange to itself (FREUD, 1919, p. 295, our translation).

Another idea addressed in this text that articulates to the anguish is the “compulsion to repetition” to better explain it, Freud uses the following example: one summer afternoon walking through the streets of a city in the province of Italy and stopped in a deserted street; then hurried and continued walking, but when it realized it, it was again in this same street, and it completed that at that moment it felt a sense of strangeness, and called it an involuntary return. If we stop to think, this involuntary repetition many would call luck, when we see the

same number several times, for example, and we always try to designate a meaning about this occurrence (FREUD, 1919).

From this example given by Freud, we identify the concept of compulsion to repeat:

[...] it is possible to recognize in the unconscious mind, the predominance of a “compulsion to repetition”, coming from the impulse and probably inherent in the very nature of the impulse - a compulsion powerful enough to prevail over the principle of pleasure, lending to certain aspects of the mind its demonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of young children; a compulsion which is also responsible for a part of the direction taken by the analyses of neurotic patients. All these considerations prepare us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this intimate “compulsion to repetition” is perceived as strange (FREUD, 1919, p. 297, our translation).

Psychoanalytical theory supports the idea that all affection belongs to an emotional impulse and, when repressed, it turns into anguish. Therefore, among all the examples of frightening elements, there must be some category in which the object that frightens may be something repressed that has returned, that is, it constitutes a return of the repressed. And this category of frightening things would then be the strange one. This is nothing new or foreign, but something familiar that has only been alienated by this process of recalculation.

Thus Freud (1919) states: a strange experience occurs when the infantile complexes that had been recalculated revive once again through some impression, or when the primitive beliefs that had been overcome seem to be again. With this, they are elements that participate in the formation of infantile anguish, elements that most human beings have never entirely liberated themselves.

Second theory of anguish

In 1926, in the text "Inhibition Symptom and Anxiety", Freud modified his theory that anguish would be originated by libido. He considers anguish, then, as a reaction to a dangerous or traumatic situation. Also, in this text the dichotomy between realistic anguish and neurotic anguish is abandoned. In both situations, it is the fear of a threat: in the first case, a threat from outside and; in the second, an internal threat, that is, the sexual excitement itself. Freud also states that although the situations of danger are diverse, the fear of the loss of the loved object is a common point.

Freud (1926) points out that birth would be the inaugural moment of anguish, prototype of all later danger situations. Birth would constitute a first trauma that, by

projecting the subject into an experience of helplessness, would provoke to the self an excess of stimulus impossible to be discharged.

Still according to Freud, there is a relation between inhibition and anguish, since the first inhibitions can appear as an attempt to avoid anguish. And from where does these inhibitions come? For him, they are different origins: due to an attempt of the self to avoid a conflict with it, with the overcoming or they can occur due to an impoverishment of the amount of energy.

A symptom, unlike an inhibition, is a sign of something pathological and that does not occur within the “self” but acts on it. The symptom is caused by the repressing, being a sign and a substitute of a pulsional satisfaction. Thus, Freud points out that the process of recalculation occurs in the ego and that this is the seat of anguish. Anguish is the necessary condition for the appearance of the symptom, because it is it that awakens the mechanism of pleasure-pleasure, which paralyzes the processes of that.

Freud takes up the famous cases of Little Hans and the Man of the Wolves, analyzed by him earlier. The first deals with a horse phobia in a five-year-old boy and the second with an adult patient whose neurosis began in childhood, presenting several symptoms, including a phobia. In both cases, the presence of ambivalent feelings towards the father figure is observed. He states that, in these patients, the hostile impulse against the father suffered recalculation and the symptom was formed by the displacement of the father figure to an animal: in the case of Hans the horse; and in the case of the Wolf Man, the wolf.

The motive force of the repress in these clinical cases would have been the fear of castration, confirming that the origin of the repress would be in anguish, in the fear of a danger (castration).

It was the anguish that produced the repress and not, as I previously believed, the repress that produced the anguish [...]. It is always the attitude of anguish of the self that is the primary thing and that sets the anguish in motion. Anguish never arises from a repressed libido (FREUD, 1926, p. 111, our translation).

Therefore, Freud concludes that the anguish is not just displeasure. Although there is this characteristic, it is not the only one. It is the threat of an unknown danger, a psychic helplessness, relative to each phase of life:

Thus the danger of psychic helplessness is appropriate to the danger of life when the self of the individual is immature; the danger of the loss of an object, until early childhood, when he is still in dependence on others; the danger of castration until the phallic phase; and the fear of his overcoming,

until the period of latency. Nevertheless, all these situations of danger and determinants of anguish may endure side by side and cause the self to react to them with anguish in a later period than is appropriate; or else several of them may come into play at the same time (FREUD, 1926, p. 140, our translation).

In 1933 Freud reaffirms the theory presented in “Inhibition Symptom and Anxiety” (1926), but now he does so in the form of a conference entitled “Anxiety and Instinctual Life”. The author highlights as the main point the fact that anguish is not the product of repress, but rather what causes repress.

Thus:

[...] It seems that anguish, insofar as it constitutes an affective state, is the reproduction of an old event that represented a threat of danger; anguish serves the purpose of self-preservation and is a sign of a new danger; it arises from the libido that has become somehow unusable and also arises during the process of recalculation; it is replaced by the formation of a symptom, it is, so to speak, psychically linked—we have the impression that here something is missing that would bring all these pieces together in a whole (FREUD, 1933, p. 107, our translation).

Moreover, after the second topic, in which Freud divides the psychic apparatus in *id*, *ego* e *super-ego*, he presents a new position regarding anguish. The main types of anguish would be related to some pressure that the ego – thirsting for anguish – suffers as a result of the relation of dependence that it establishes. Thus, realistic anguish occurs due to the relation of the ego with the external world; neurotic anguish as a result of the pressures of this and moral anguish as a demand of the super-ego.

Finally, from all his elaboration about anguish and the ways in which it is perceived, Freud summarizes his findings in two types of expression of anguish. Thus, we can consider the existence of sign anguish, which has a protective function, since it prepares the self by anticipating the traumatic. Signal anguish is at the service of the principle of pleasure and, therefore, of the pulse of life, that is, it signals and protects the psychism. The other type is called automatic anguish and configures the reunion with the traumatic which, in psychoanalysis, is always an amount of excessive excitement that the psychic apparatus cannot process (FREUD, 1933). Automatic anguish does not allow the “self” to prepare and defend itself, so that it is in the order of the irrepressible and, for this very reason, it is articulated to what Freud named as the death drive.

Conclusion

After going through Freud's journey about anguish, we realize that this subject is one of the pillars of psychoanalytic theory. It is like a tree with its ramifications, that is, anguish is also articulated with other important concepts for psychoanalysis, such as libido, inhibition, repress, symptom, among others.

From this work, we can see that Freud built two well demarcated theories about anguish, which are related to two distinct moments of his work and his elaborations. In the first moment, anguish is the result of an unloaded sexual excitement, that is, here anguish is linked to sexuality. However, as Leite (2011) reminds us, the advances from Freud's clinical experience, the discovery of the Oedipus complex and the fear of castration, as well as the theme of guilt and the elaboration of the second topic lead to a new perspective regarding anguish. In this second moment, anguish is defined as an affective state and is related to the idea of psychic helplessness, either automatically – in the traumatic experience - or as a sign, which allows the self a preparation that has the function of avoiding to relive the traumatic situation.

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How to reference this article

HUGUENIN, A. C. de F.; BRITO, L. C. A route through the anguish in freud's work. **Doxa: Rev. Bras. Psico. e Educ.**, Araraquara, v. 22, n. esp. 1, p. 271-283, out., 2020. e-ISSN: 2594-8385. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30715/doxa.v22iesp.1.14133>

Submitted: 20/04/2020

Revisions required: 15/06/2020

Approved: 20/08/2020

Published: 30/09/2020