

# ABOUT THE CAUSES OF AGORAPHOBIA

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## 1. Introduction and statement of the problem

Etymologically, the word “agoraphobia” refers to the fear of entering an open and public place, but from a technical point of view it also encompasses closed places, whether public or private, as well as travelling by means of transport.<sup>1</sup>

The person suffering from agoraphobia avoids going to places that they fear because they believe that if they do, they may have a panic attack. The fear of having a panic attack is called “anticipatory anxiety” and contributes to the panic attack happening.<sup>2</sup> In order to avoid it, it is usual to seek the company of a person who provides security.

“Anticipatory anxiety” explains why agoraphobia persists after having suffered a first panic attack, but not why it appears. The purpose of this work is to investigate it.

## 2. Three types of agoraphobia

In a previous work I proposed three ways in which agoraphobia is triggered:<sup>3</sup>

- a) Agoraphobia which arises after having suffered a traumatic experience;
- b) Agoraphobia which arises after having suffered a panic attack;
- c) Agoraphobia which arises as reactivation of fears that are typical of childhood and adolescence.

However, from a causal point of view, the following classification is more appropriate.

- a) Primary agoraphobia;
- b) Secondary agoraphobia;
- c) Agoraphobia due to symbolization.

In “primary agoraphobia”, physical space *is* the reason for danger. In “secondary agoraphobia”, the physical space *houses* the reason for danger. In “agoraphobia due to symbolization”, physical space *symbolizes* the reason for danger.

Let us start by analyzing secondary agoraphobia since its dynamics is easier to describe.

### 2.1. Secondary agoraphobia

In the agoraphobia which in this work we call “secondary”, the characteristics of a certain physical space do not represent in themselves a reason for danger, but that physical space *houses* something which is considered a *manifest* danger. For example, a teenager avoids going outside on weekends because they fear meeting classmates on the street, who bully them at school, but they can walk without any fear through the streets of a remote town. In this case, the streets of their village become dangerous due to the relationship of *proximity* between them and the *manifest* reason for danger, which is, meeting their classmates.

In “secondary” agoraphobia we can distinguish three subtypes:

- 1- Agoraphobia appears in a certain physical space that houses an object or circumstance which represents a *real danger*. This is the case, for example, of the adolescent victim of bullying mentioned above.
- 2- Agoraphobia appears in a certain physical space that houses a phobic object, that is, an object that represents an *imaginary danger* (the danger is not real but a product of their imagination).<sup>4</sup> It is, for example, the person who fears insects and for that reason stops going to the countryside.<sup>5</sup>
- 3- Agoraphobia appears after having suffered a traumatic experience and it is feared that it may happen again. Consequently, they avoid going to places where this risk is considered to exist. It is, therefore, the fear of *potential danger*. For example, a person was run over in the street and thereafter avoids leaving the house as a defensive measure. The street, in itself, does not produce fear, but rather the possibility of being the victim of an accident while at it.

### 2.2. Primary agoraphobia

As just pointed out, secondary agoraphobia is caused by a *proximity* relationship with a certain *manifest* danger, whether real, imaginary or potential. On the other hand, in “primary” agoraphobia, the person does not recognize that there is any danger that justifies their fear, and attributes it to the characteristics of the physical space.

In primary agoraphobia, as a rule, those who suffer from it find no explanation for the fact that certain places produce fear and others do not. For example, they may feel safe in closed places, but are unable to move or stay in open places, or vice versa. Also, they are able to walk around or stay in certain places, whether closed or open, but not in others.

The phenomenon of primary agoraphobia confirms that the spatial factor plays an important role in the formation of human subjectivity.<sup>6, 7</sup>

### 2.2.1. The spatial factor as a constitutive element of subjectivity

During the first days or weeks of life, parents accommodate the baby in their room, in order to monitor her/him and be able to respond to her/his needs immediately. But after a while, those needs do not require as much urgency and the baby can sleep in another room. There, when she/he wakes up, she/he does not see their parents or hear their breathing or movements and the fear of having lost them or been abandoned by them makes her/him to anguish and cry. However, thanks to the love and help of their parents, the room will become familiar and cozy. The baby's room, away from parental watch, is a physical space that she/he needs in order to mature in a healthy way. In reality, all this happens without the baby realizing it, because during the first months of life she/he are only able to perceive that the parents are present or absent, but she/he still cannot guess that when the parents are absent it is because they are in another place.

When the parents accommodate the baby in another room, they take them away from their watch. Maybe it is a room that the baby should share with other siblings or even grandparents, but that is her/his place nonetheless. The child needs to have their own space where they can get away from the continuous watch of the parents, that is, from the continuous reach of their wishes, anguish and control. And in turn, this distance also frees the child from the impulse to control their parents,<sup>8</sup> and thanks to this the child can discover other interests, which is very difficult to achieve if the parents are permanently present.

At the end of the first year of life, approximately, the baby discovers the importance of the spatial factor. It is the moment that Piaget attributes to the acquisition of what he calls the "permanent object schema".<sup>9</sup> Until then, as it has been pointed out before, the baby perceives that objects appear and disappear, but after the acquisition of the "permanent object schema" they are able to understand that when an object is out of their perceptual field it is because it is in another place. This stage also coincides with the beginning of the so-called depressive position described by Melanie Klein, a moment in which the child manages to recognize that the same person can arouse feelings of love and hate at the same time.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to this, they acquire the ability to miss their mother figure when she is not and to patiently await for her return. It is also the moment when the child begins to play at making objects appear and disappear, and which Freud attributes to the attempt to mentally represent the comings and goings of the mother figure, as well as the affective ambivalence that this generates, fundamental for the development of the ability to symbolize.<sup>11</sup> Finally, it is also the time when the child learns to walk and they are able to approach or move away at will from the figures of love and protection.

At school age, the child leaves the family home for a few hours to go to school and to live with their peers. The school is also the child's space, necessary to be able to mature in a healthy way, away from the physical watch of parents, who have delegated this function to teachers.

As noted above, the possibility of developing socially and as a person depends on the correct watch exercised by parents and paternal referents. However, it also depends on the possibility of being able to move away from them, since the child must learn to self-monitor, have their own interests and develop their own personality.

At puberty, away from the watch of others, the adolescent discovers the space of intimacy, where they discover their sexuality, which they gradually learn to share.

During the first months of life, parental watch represents the main guarantee of care and protection. In turn, feeling watched by them develops in the baby the ability to trust others and themselves. However, during childhood and adolescence, parental watch also arouses the desire to hide and the fear of being discovered.

#### 2.2.2. Fantasies linked to watch

During childhood and adolescence, the physical proximity of parents or paternal referents allows watch, which, as it has been pointed out, is exercised in both directions and with different interests.

a) *Watch exercised by parents*: watch exercised by parents or paternal referents can awaken different types of fantasies in the child and adolescent. For example, they may be comfortable feeling watched because they feel cared for, protected, and loved. Conversely, they may feel uncomfortable because they consider that watch denotes distrust and does not allow them to learn to take care of themselves or enjoy their own privacy. In such a case, they can learn to watch that they are not watched.

b) *Watch exercised by the child*: the child may like to watch their parents to know what they do, learn from them or out of curiosity. Or vice versa, they prefer to stay away from them because they realize that the impulse to watch their parents prevent them from being interested in other things.

#### 2.2.3. Fantasies linked to non-watch

The child or adolescent can interpret the absence of parental vigilance as a sign that they trust them and that, therefore, they can trust themselves. Or vice versa, as a sign that the parents ignore them and that they do not love them. In these circumstances, the child or adolescent can learn to get themselves monitored, for example, committing acts in which they put themselves at risk and that forces parents or paternal referents to remain continuously present and watching. In turn, they can also interpret the absence of watch as an invitation to lose control and acting out,<sup>12</sup> a temptation that can arouse excitement or, conversely, anguish and fear.<sup>13</sup>

#### 2.2.4. The symbolization of presence and absence

During childhood and adolescence, the act of watch is closely linked to the presence or physical proximity of parents or paternal referents. For this reason, during this stage two fundamental physical spaces are established: the physical space that remains within the scope of that watch, and the physical space that remains outside the scope of that watch.

As the maturity process progresses, the child and adolescent acquires the ability to symbolize the presence and absence of parents or paternal referents, and the act of watch is disconnected from the physical condition. For example, a child or adolescent may feel that their father is absent despite living with him daily, or that he is still present and watching in his decisions despite having died. However, during childhood and adolescence, the physical

presence and absence of parents or paternal referents continues to be very important in the constitution of subjectivity.

The ability to symbolize such presence also allows the child to become a safety figure themselves (that is, a paternal referent) and to develop their own self-monitoring and self-confidence. For example, a child of a certain age is already considered capable of going to school alone and hanging out with friends.

Thanks to the ability to symbolize the presence of parents or paternal referents, the physical space is no longer divided into two (the one that remains within the scope of watch and the one that remains outside). In other words, thanks to the ability of symbolizing, children and adolescents no longer need to be physically close to parents or security figures in order to feel safe anywhere.

#### 2.2.5. The fall of the ability to symbolize

However, if for some reason this ability to symbolize the presence of parents or security figures falls, the physical space is again divided into the space that remains “inside” and the one that remains “outside” the scope of the watch referred to parents,<sup>14</sup> and that is what seems to occur in primary agoraphobia.

*In primary agoraphobia, in the physical absence of the so-called “security figures”, fantasies typical of childhood and adolescence may unconsciously emerge, referring to the absence of parental figures and the watch linked to them. Such fantasies produce anguish and panic and we conclude that they are the cause of primary agoraphobia.<sup>15</sup>*

That is, we conclude that the main cause of fear in primary agoraphobia is the absence of security figures. Therefore, the definition of “primary agoraphobia” with which this section has been headed must be rectified, since, as occurs in secondary agoraphobia, the characteristics of a certain physical space are not the main cause of fear either. However, in the absence of a more precise nomenclature, we will continue to call this type of agoraphobia “primary agoraphobia”.

### 2.3. Agoraphobia due to symbolization

Agoraphobia “due to symbolization” occurs because a connection is established between certain characteristics of a physical space and an unconscious fear (in the same way that a flag can arouse emotions because it represents a certain country or a certain ideology). That is, through a process of symbolization, physical space ceases to be an innocuous place and becomes an imaginary danger (not a real danger, since by itself, physical space does not represent any danger).

It is, for example, the case of agoraphobia described by Freud in a 38-year-old woman, who had a panic attack for the first time at the age of 17, when she was in the street. Apparently, it happened when she was going to buy the utensils that she needed to attend a dance to which she was invited. Specifically, the attack occurred shortly after passing in front of the house where lived a friend of hers who had recently died. Through hypnosis, she was able to remember the idea which had come to her the moment before the panic attack: “Now I am going to be the one to die”, as a result of the feeling of guilt caused by going to a dance shortly

after the death of her friend. From then on, she began to suffer from agoraphobia.<sup>16</sup> In this case of agoraphobia, the street symbolically represents the fear of dying.

The mechanism that gives rise to “agoraphobia due to symbolization” is the one that Freud attributes to the constitution of the phobia in general:<sup>17</sup> by a displacement mechanism, an innocuous object (in the case of the example, the street) is invested with the characteristics of an unconscious idea that produces fear (in the case of the example, the possibility of dying). Consequently, that innocuous object becomes a phobic object.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

The objective of this work, as indicated in the introduction, is to investigate the possible causes of agoraphobia. To do this, it has been differentiated between “primary agoraphobia”, “secondary agoraphobia” and “agoraphobia due to symbolization”. Secondary agoraphobia occurs because a certain physical space *houses* a reason for *manifest* danger, whether real, imagined or potential. In primary agoraphobia, the danger motive is *unconscious* and refers to the *absence of a security figure*. In agoraphobia due to symbolization, the danger motive is *unconscious* and occurs because physical space *has become* a phobic object.

In primary agoraphobia, the cause of fear refers to an *absence* (of the security figure), while in secondary agoraphobia and agoraphobia due to symbolization it refers to a *presence* (of a manifest danger in the first case and unconscious in the second).

On the other hand, in secondary agoraphobia and agoraphobia due to symbolization, the presence of the security figure is a resource that *mitigates the sensation of danger*. In primary agoraphobia, on the other hand, the absence of the security figure is *the cause of the sensation of danger*.

In secondary agoraphobia, the panic attack is triggered by *the proximity of manifest danger*. In agoraphobia due to symbolization, it is triggered because *the physical space represents an imaginary danger*. In primary agoraphobia it is triggered by the *absence of the security figure*. In all three cases, once the first panic attack is triggered, the anxiety of anticipatory anxiety is also added.

Secondary agoraphobia may occur both in childhood, adolescence and in adulthood, since it arises in the physical proximity of any manifest circumstance that may represent a reason for danger. Agoraphobia due to symbolization may also occur at any age because its unconscious mechanism has already been active since childhood. Primary agoraphobia, on the other hand, is typical of adolescence or adulthood and not of childhood, because during this stage parents or other security figures usually accompany the child.

## 4. References

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2. Pombo, S., Ferro, A., Protocolo cognitivo-comportamental para a perturbação de pânico: eficácia numa amostra portuguesa, *Psicologia, saúde & doenças*, 2018, 19(3), pp. 693-709.
3. Martínez Farrero, P. *Agorafobia y crisis de angustia. Causas y desencadenantes*. Published with the support of the Official College of Psychology of Catalonia, Barcelona, 2018.
4. In this case, it is convenient to differentiate between the phobic object that is due to a neurotic construction and the one that is due to a delusion (for example, not wanting to go out into the street because it is believed that a secret group is waiting there with the intention of persecuting). When the phobic object is due to a neurotic construction, physical distance from it frees one from anguish and allows one to recognize that it is an irrational fear. That does not happen when it is a delusion.
5. It is also the example that Freud exposes in the clinical case of a boy named Hans, who fears horses to the point of not wanting to go out to avoid meeting them. See Freud S., Analysis of a phobia in a five-year-old boy (1909), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. X, London, The Hogarth Press, 1981, pp. 114-115.
6. See the concept of “heterotopia” in Foucault.  
<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>
7. Hünefeldt, T. y Schlitte, A. (Eds.), *Situatedness and Place. Contributions To Phenomenology Vol. 95. Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Spatio-temporal Contingency of Human Life*. Switzerland, Springer International Publishing AG, part of Springer Nature, 2018.
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11. Freud S., Beyond the pleasure principle (1920), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII, London, The Hogarth Press, 1981, pp. 12-17.

12. Freud S., Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XX, London, The Hogarth Press, 1978, pp. 109.
13. Those who suffer from primary agoraphobia usually refer to the fear of losing control, a fear which can be interpreted as a reaction to the unconscious desire to lose control, and that can emerge when they are away from the watch and control of known people. I thank the psychoanalyst Graziella Baravalle for this idea.
14. If the presence of paternal referents cannot be symbolized, it is not possible to identify with them either, so self-confidence falls. In turn, these paternal attributes are usually projected onto certain people (who are called "security figures" in adult psychopathology), who from then on will have the property of conferring security and on whom one will depend. According to Freud, the dependency established with the security figure is the consequence of a regression to primitive narcissism. See Freud S., Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety (1926), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XX, London, The Hogarth Press, 1978, pp. 127-128. In severe cases of agoraphobia, such regression to the stage of narcissism is usually clearly observed. Actually, this could be the cause of the fall out of the ability to symbolize the presence and absence of parents and paternal referents and, therefore, of primary agoraphobia.
15. A common fear expressed in claustrophobia is being trapped in a closed place and not being able to get out. When there is no obvious reason for danger, this fear may respond to the unconscious fear of not being able to enter the space where security figures are present.
16. Freud S., Studies on hysteria (1895), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. II, n. 2, London, The Hogarth Press, 1981, pp. 112-114.
17. Freud S., Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety (1926), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XX, London, The Hogarth Press, 1981, pp. 124-127.