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A STUDY OF VARIABLES ASSOCIATED
WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY AT A
SUMMER CAMP

by
HOWARD GREEN and VALERIE GARSTIN



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**A STUDY OF VARIABLES ASSOCIATED WITH SEPARATION
ANXIETY AT A SUMMER CAMP**

by

Howard Green and Valerie Garstin

AN ABSTRACT OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

Submitted to

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

1967

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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to determine if separation anxiety, commonly referred to as homesickness, could be predicted prior to its expression or even prior to the arrival of a child at camp for a short nineteen day separation. The basic plan for the study was to collect data from camper information sheets filled out by the parents, counsellor evaluation sheets of the campers, and records of the caseworker, for four samples of children: homesick females, homesick males, non-homesick females and non-homesick males. The one hundred and fifty children half homesick, were analysed to determine if there were characteristics which differentiated the homesick group from the non-homesick group. Mark's Criterion Pattern Analysis, programmed for the CDC 3600 was used to elicit sets of characteristics common to any criteria group.

Results arrived at from this study suggest that the ability to predict separation anxiety prior to the child's expression of homesickness is not feasible. No single variable or set of variables were isolated which made it

possible to predict homesickness or its absence. A trend however did appear through all four criteria groups which indicated a successful overall adjustment to camp. Children whose parents had an intact marriage, who came from a low economic status and who had good eating habits as rated by a camp counsellor showed a better adjustment to camp than those children not showing any two of these three characteristics.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction.....	1
Overview of Study Design.....	6
Sample.....	7
Measurements.....	9
Results.....	10
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	12
Demographic Characteristics of Sample by Criteria Groups.....	15
Psychological Characteristics of Sample by Criteria Groups.....	17
References.....	19

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Demographic Characteristics of Sample by Criteria Groups.....	15
Psychological Characteristics of Sample by Criteria Groups.....	17

A STUDY OF VARIABLES ASSOCIATED WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY AT A SUMMER CAMP

Separation anxiety usually is discussed as an inter-related variable in the expression of overt manifestations, such as: phobias, adjustment reactions, anxiety reactions, conversion reactions. Whatever form the separation anxiety takes, it has as its center the feature of hostility and aggression. The fears of what the child would like to do, and his fear of doing it are said to be a projection onto the mother.

Bowlby sums up the reaction of the child to separation succinctly. Speaking specifically of children aged twelve months to four years, he says that, "All children of this age, except those who have already suffered considerable deprivation of maternal care or are seriously ill, react to the experience with shock and anxiety."¹ Bowlby separates separation anxiety into three phases: protest, despair and detachment. Protest may last a few hours to a

¹Bowlby, John, "Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood," The Psychoanalytic Study of The Child, Vol. 16, 1960, p. 89.

week or more. Despair follows protest and the individual shows increasing helplessness. This in turn is followed by detachment in which the child appears to have lost all interest in the mother.

The recreational literature on separation anxiety as it is related to a summer camp experience, was of limited value. Several books written for the camp counselor deal with the subject of "homesickness" but they handle it in a superficial manner. While these articles and statements do have some value to untrained staff their use is limited. Statements are usually based on limited observation and assertions are rarely supported by evidence. For example, "Statistics show that homesickness occurs most often with girls in the eleven to fourteen age range who are having a first experience away from home."² There appeared no bibliography, support or reference of any type to substantiate statements such as this made in this article and others like it. In short, if studies and research projects have been done in an expert and scientific manner we were

²Spiegel, Harry & Eleanor, "Start Treatment for Homesickness Before Child Comes to Camp", Camping Magazine, June, 1964, p. 20.

unable to find them in a review of primary sources.

One unpublished study reported at a Camping Association Convention in Virginia in February of 1967, and subsequently reported to the authors by Sam Marcus, Executive Director of Camp Tamarack, Detroit, Michigan, concluded that there was a direct correlation between a child's adjustment to camp and his socialization and swimming ability during the camping season.

Dr. Harmon Putter found that the lower the socio-economic level of a child, the lower was his adaptation to camp.³ Newness of the camp experience however, does not produce a significantly different degree of adaptation to camp than that found with a prior experience. Sex did not appear to make a difference. No significant difference was found between children coming from broken and unbroken homes. Age difference did not have an influence on the adaptation to camp.

There are several possibilities for the lack of

³Putter, H., "Adaptation and Resident Camping", Journal of Jewish Communal Service, Vol. XLIII, No. 3, Spring 1967, p. 260-269.

professional studies and research on this topic in relation to summer camping: they were not done; this subject was covered as an issue under larger studies -- thereby just being listed as a factor taken into consideration or one of significance; case-workers in a summer camp are a fairly recent phenomenon; the short duration of stay a child experiences at a summer camp coupled with a closing-down of the facility for a ten month period does not lend itself to systematic and in-depth research. Furthermore face sheet or case history information is usually superficial and lacking in any depth; staff usually professionally untrained.

The literature available deals primarily with the handling of "homesickness" once it becomes evident in the child. This appears in many ways to be, as the old cliché states, "locking the barn after the horse has been stolen." No literature was found which deals with the characteristics of the child who tends to become homesick and which would predict that symptom at the time of acceptance for camp. Usually identification waits until the counselor comes dashing up and proclaims that the child is crying hysterically, has just run away, etc., and is suffering from an acute case

of separation anxiety.

There are limitations, then, within the general lack of research available on homesickness at camp, prediction of which children will become homesick, what traits they will show in advance and treatment that can be initiated with these children with pre-recognition determined upon a scientific, diagnostic basis is simply not possible at present to any satisfactory degree.

The senior author, a caseworker in a summer camp for two years, had noted several characteristics of separation anxiety in this setting. Except for a few children, it seems to occur within between thirty-six and seventy two hours after the child's arrival at camp. It is not always the child who is away from home for the first time. Some children show no overt signs during the first year at camp but develop it during the second or third year. It is contagious and seems to spread from child to child, from group to group once started. The degree depends upon the particular strength or weakness of the child's counselor. The children show separation anxiety in a variety of ways, such as: poor appetite or ravenous appetite, crying, upset

stomach, fighting, complete withdrawal, crying out to parents for help, manipulation of parents by producing guilt through letters, dependence upon counselor or complete isolation from him and other people. About one child in four showed separation anxiety in a manner directly obvious to the staff.

It appeared that if the etiology of separation anxiety and/or variables which would predict occurrence with some accuracy could be identified that both staff and child could work through this period more effectively and that reduction or removal of the anxiety could be effected. Therefore the study reported here was carried out.

Overview of Study Design

The basic plan for this study was to collect data from camper information sheets filled out by the parents, counselor evaluation sheets of the campers, and records of the caseworker (where available) for two samples of children. One consisted of seventy five children who attended camp during the summer of 1965 and 1966 and showed separation anxiety. The second group were seventy

five children showing no separation anxiety. These groups were used to explore retroactively the possibility that variables which predispose a child to separation anxiety could be isolated. However, information regarding children prior to their arrival at camp was only available in limited amounts, submitted by the parents. This study, therefore, was not likely to provide a sound basis for predicting separation anxiety prior to the children's arrival at camp. It could however determine (1) whether there were any objective variables which might predispose a child to separation anxiety and which were easily available such as, Marital Status of the parents and (2) whether there were variables which could be used soon after arrival to predict occurrence of the symptoms.

Sample

One hundred and fifty children in a Jewish Summer Camp for nineteen day periods were the primary study subjects. Seventy five of these children showed separation anxiety while at camp and seventy five did not. The responses to separation anxiety were subject to intervention by the staff, prior to its outward expression if it

were recognized. This may have contaminated the samples to the extent that successful intervention prevented occurrence of the anxiety. However, it was assumed that there is so little information on when to predict the phenomena, that the intervention was unlikely to be effective prior to its overt manifestation. Nevertheless, the cases in the non-separation anxiety group selected randomly, may have included a few in which homesickness was successfully prevented by counsellor intervention.

The only matching requirements used for the groups were: an approximately equal distribution of age and sex and that the child be free of known emotional or medical problems for which he was currently being treated. All children were of the same ethnic background because of the religious auspices of the camp. Certainly individual pathology plays a part in the capacity of each individual to handle a crisis situation, but attention here was focused on the significance of non-pathological indicators leading to evidence of separation anxiety.

Separation anxiety, for the purpose of this design, was defined as manifesting one or more of the following

symptoms: crying and wanting to go home; complaints about camp for non-justified reasons; eating difficulties; wanting his mother; running away; making needless trips to the clinic, failing to go to activities; poor peer or adult relationships; night fears.

Measurements

Concepts about the process and theory of separation anxiety derived from the literature were used as a guide to select the information collected about each child in this study. The children were selected from the fifteen hundred evaluations available on the basis of those who showed separation anxiety and those who did not. The researchers' judgment played a factor in categorization but it was based on objective indices and inter-judge reliability was obtained by comparison of judgments over several cases. Cases were read until seventy-five with clear cut separation anxiety and seventy-five who clearly did not manifest it were selected. The two groups thus separated -- Group A those showing separation anxiety and Group B -- those children who did not exhibit separation anxiety at camp, were then compared according to empirical

characteristics. The characteristics then selected for comparison were age, and sex of the child, and marital status of the parents (married, divorced, widowed, separated). The child's peer relationships, counselor relationships, emotional problems, swimming ability, personal hygiene habits, eating habits, and whether the child had been at camp before were also determined.

Results

Criterion pattern analysis was used to determine if there were any characteristics common to children showing separation anxiety as opposed to those not showing separation anxiety for the four criteria groups male and female homesick and male and female not homesick.⁴ Criterion group 1, campers who were female and homesick, was comprised of thirty-six campers aged eight to ten years. Criterion group two was composed of thirty-nine male campers who were homesick. Criterion group three was composed of thirty-three female non-homesick children. Criterion group four was composed of forty-two non-homesick male children.

⁴Clark, James, Criterion Pattern Analysis, A Program for the CDC 3600 Computer, Mimeographed, 1967.

This program, a form of pattern analysis, searches responses or categories to isolate the maximum number of items with common answers from an inventory of items or characteristics. Patterns of response are identified which meet a pre-set minimum discrimination level, in this case sixty percent, which means that any pattern of response categories had at least sixty percent, of the cases in the pattern in the criterion group. In this method, by searching each criterion group for patterns distinguishing the cases from all other criterion groups, it is possible to isolate multiple variables which predict to the criterion under consideration. Single variables or combinations of variables are isolated by this technique. Using this method it was not possible to isolate predictive patterns as can be seen by tables 1 and 2 pg.15 - 18. Insofar as this study could determine from the information measured, a child shows no special characteristics prior to his arrival at camp that allow the prediction of homesickness or separation anxiety prior to its expression by the child. There did appear to be a co-relation between general adjustment to camp and the child whose parents were together, came from a low economic status and had good eating habits. The children who

showed these characteristics whether homesick or not homesick, appeared to make a good adjustment to camp and had a successful camping experience. Although a child might show homesickness at the beginning of the camping period this did not preclude that a child could not show a good adjustment to camp by the end of his stay. Comparisons to arrive at these conclusions was done by measuring the frequency of given characteristics against the criteria groups. For example, poor counsellor and poor eating showed up as often in criteria groups three and four as they did in criteria groups one and two. It appeared that one factor that could not be adequately controlled within this study was the rating of the children by the counsellors. Counsellors at this camp are comprised of college students, the preponderance in their freshman and sophomore year. Their assessment of the individual child's characteristics would produce an individual margin of error. However, for the purposes of this study all counsellors were considered as equal in their rating abilities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based upon the limited findings established in this

study it must be concluded that there is no way of predicting homesickness in a child prior to his showing it once he has arrived at camp. However, from the sample group it seems that children who have an intact home, low economic status, and show good table manners will usually make an ultimately successful adjustment at camp whether showing homesickness or not. A further study would appear indicated to assess the predictability of the child's adjustment to camp and his ability to have a satisfactory camp experience. An additional purpose of this future study might be to resolve the discrepancy in findings between our study and Dr. Putter's within the area of the socio-economic level of the child.⁵ Dr. Putter's study concluded that the lower the socio-economic level the poorer the child's adaptation to camp while our study concluded the converse of this. Since Dr. Putter's study covered children from seven to fourteen years of age and our study was based on children in the eight to ten year age range, direct comparisons cannot be made. The question is raised however by both studies regarding the adaptation of the

⁵ Putter, H., op. cit.

lower socio-economic status child. Any future study should resolve this discrepancy.

TABLE I
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE
BY CRITERIA GROUPS

Demographic Characteristics		Homesick Female I		Homesick Male II		Total	%
Sex	Male	<u>No.</u> <u>%</u>		<u>No.</u> <u>%</u>			
	Female	36		39		75	
Age							
	8 yrs.	11	31	11	28	22	29
	9 yrs.	14	39	19	49	33	44
	10 yrs.	11	31	9	23	20	27
Marital Status of Parents							
	Together	33	92	33	85	66	88
	Apart	3	8	6	15	9	12
At Camp Before							
	Yes	14	39	18	46	32	43
	No	22	61	21	54	43	57
Economic Status							
	Good	33	92	32	82	65	87
	Poor	3	8	7	18	10	13

TABLE I (continued)

Demographic Characteristics		Non-Homesick Female III		Non-Homesick Male IV		Total	%
Sex		<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>		
	Male			42		81	
	Female	33				<u>69</u> 150	
Age							
	8 yrs.	5	15	10	24	15	20
	9 yrs.	18	55	22	52	40	53
	10 yrs.	10	30	10	24	20	27
Marital Status of Parents							
	Together	30	91	36	86	66	88
	Apart	3	9	6	14	9	12
At Camp Before							
	Yes	15	45	19	45	34	45
	No	18	55	23	55	41	55
Economic Status							
	Good	27	82	29	69	56	75
	Poor	6	18	13	31	19	25

TABLE 2
PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE
BY CRITERIA GROUPS

Psychological Characteristics	Homesick Female I		Homesick Male II		Total	%
Peer Relationships	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>		
Good	31	86	28	72	59	79
Poor	5	14	11	28	16	21
Counsellor Relationships						
Good	27	75	30	77	57	76
Poor	9	25	9	23	18	24
Emotional Problems						
Yes	4	11	8	21	12	16
No	32	89	31	79	63	84
Hygiene						
Good	33	92	32	82	65	87
Poor	3	8	7	18	10	13
Eating						
Good	31	86	25	64	56	75
Poor	5	14	14	36	19	25
Swimming						
Good	14	39	16	41	30	40
Average	11	31	8	21	19	25
Poor	11	31	15	38	26	35

TABLE 2 (continued)

Psychological Characteristics	Non-Homesick Female III		Non-Homesick Male IV		Total	%
Peer Relation- ships	No.	%	No.	%		
Good	28	85	37	88	65	87
Poor	5	15	5	12	10	13
Counsellor Relationships						
Good	28	85	35	83	63	84
Poor	5	15	7	17	12	16
Emotional Problems						
Yes	5	15	6	14	11	15
No	28	85	36	86	64	85
Hygiene						
Good	29	88	35	83	64	85
Poor	4	12	7	17	11	15
Eating						
Good	28	85	32	76	60	80
Poor	5	15	10	24	15	20
Swimming						
Good	11	33	15	36	26	35
Average	7	21	7	17	14	19
Poor	11	31	15	38	26	35

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