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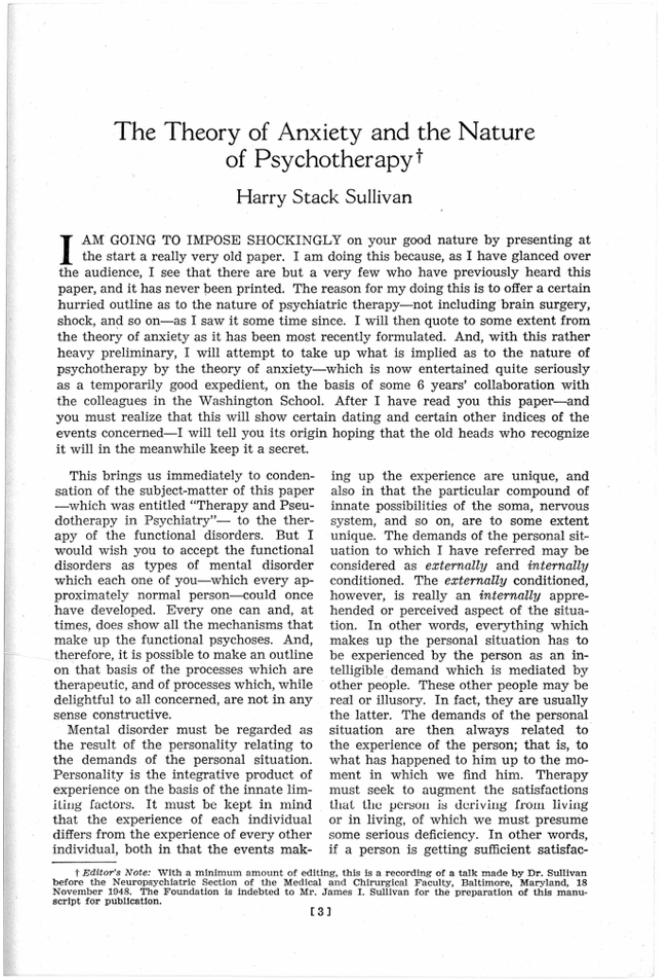

The Theory of Anxiety and the Nature of Psychotherapy†

Harry Stack Sullivan

I AM GOING TO IMPOSE SHOCKINGLY on your good nature by presenting at the start a really very old paper. I am doing this because, as I have glanced over the audience, I see that there are but a very few who have previously heard this paper, and it has never been printed. The reason for my doing this is to offer a certain hurried outline as to the nature of psychiatric therapy—not including brain surgery, shock, and so on—as I saw it some time since. I will then quote to some extent from the theory of anxiety as it has been most recently formulated. And, with this rather heavy preliminary, I will attempt to take up what is implied as to the nature of psychotherapy by the theory of anxiety—which is now entertained quite seriously as a temporarily good expedient, on the basis of some 6 years' collaboration with the colleagues in the Washington School. After I have read you this paper—and you must realize that this will show certain dating and certain other indices of the events concerned—I will tell you its origin hoping that the old heads who recognize it will in the meanwhile keep it a secret.

This brings us immediately to condensation of the subject-matter of this paper —which was entitled "Therapy and Pseudotherapy in Psychiatry"— to the therapy of the functional disorders. But I would wish you to accept the functional disorders as types of mental disorder which each one of you—which every approximately normal person—could once have developed. Every one can and, at times, does show all the mechanisms that make up the functional psychoses. And, therefore, it is possible to make an outline on that basis of the processes which are therapeutic, and of processes which, while delightful to all concerned, are not in any sense constructive.

Mental disorder must be regarded as the result of the personality relating to the demands of the personal situation. Personality is the integrative product of experience on the basis of the innate limiting factors. It must be kept in mind that the experience of each individual differs from the experience of every other individual, both in that the events making up the experience are unique, and also in that the particular compound of innate possibilities of the soma, nervous system, and so on, are to some extent unique. The demands of the personal situation to which I have referred may be considered as *externally* and *internally* conditioned. The *externally* conditioned, however, is really an *internally* apprehended or perceived aspect of the situation. In other words, everything which makes up the personal situation has to be experienced by the person as an intelligible demand which is mediated by other people. These other people may be real or illusory. In fact, they are usually the latter. The demands of the personal situation are then always related to the experience of the person; that is, to what has happened to him up to the moment in which we find him. Therapy must seek to augment the satisfactions that the person is deriving from living or in living, of which we must presume some serious deficiency. In other words, if a person is getting sufficient satisfac-

† *Editor's Note:* With a minimum amount of editing, this is a recording of a talk made by Dr. Sullivan before the Neuropsychiatric Section of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty, Baltimore, Maryland, 18 November 1948. The Foundation is indebted to Mr. James I. Sullivan for the preparation of this manuscript for publication.

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