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Yiannis G. Papakostas, Aristotelis Eftychiadis, George I. Papakostas and George N. Christodoulou

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What is This?
A historical inquiry into the appropriateness of the term ‘panic disorder’

YIANNIS G. PAPAKOSTAS,a ARISTOTELIS EFTYCHIADIS,b GEORGE I. PAPAKOSTASc and GEORGE N. CHRISTODOULOUd

Panic disorder was introduced in the standard psychiatric nosology with the publication of the DSM-III in 1980. The myriad of earlier medical and psychiatric names describing anxiety attacks and related conditions were all abandoned, being housed under the term ‘panic attack and panic disorder.’ In this paper, the rationale and the appropriateness of this term are critically examined from a historical perspective.

First, a brief historical account of anxiety that comes in the episodic form, and the medical and psychiatric terminology that emerged during the last two centuries regarding this condition, are presented. Next, the origins of the concept of panic as a collective or individual fear reaction are traced from a mythological and historical standpoint, up to its current, almost accidental, introduction into the official psychiatric diagnostic systems.

Since the word ‘panic’ has its roots in the Greek god Pan and the unpleasant states inflicted by him, this god is described, as well as St Gilles – also known as St Aegidios, the Athenian – the healing saint for those suffering from panic, horror and phobias. Finally, the current diagnostic features of panic disorder are systematically compared with the corresponding troubles inflicted on people by the mythical god Pan.

It is concluded that the introduced term ‘panic’ appropriately and successfully replaced the old ones.

Keywords: anxiety disorder; history; Pan; panic; psychiatry

Introduction: a brief historical account of anxiety attacks

Despite the wide range of views about anxiety, the clinical descriptions of
anxiety that manifests itself in an episodic form as anxiety attacks display a remarkable similarity over the centuries (Lesser and Rubin, 1986: 4–10). According to Klein, the earliest description of an anxiety attack appears in Plato’s *Timaeus*, although the relevant and original passage was associated with the ‘wandering womb’ and ‘hysteria’ (Klein, 1996). Likewise, Aretaeus’ description of hysterical suffocation includes anxiety and panic attacks in addition to ‘hysteria’ (Kotsopoulos, 1986).

Similar descriptions consistent with the current notion of anxiety attacks, as formalized with the term ‘panic’ in the DSM-III (APA, 1980), have frequently appeared over the last two centuries, both in somatic and psychological medicine, although under different diagnostic labels. Cardiac neurosis, irritable heart (DaCosta’s syndrome; DaCosta, 1871), disordered action of the heart, effort syndrome, nervous exhaustion, nervous tachycardia, neurocirculatory asthenia, soldier’s heart, vasomotor neurosis, vasoregulatory asthenia, hyperventilation syndrome, beta-adrenergic anxiety neurosis and agoraphobia (a term coined by Westphal, 1872) are but a few of the names given to this condition (Angst, 1995; Nemiah, 1980; van den Hout, 1996).

It seems that the medical descriptions of anxiety attacks preceded those of psychological medicine (Angst, 1995), the former dating back to the French Revolution, while the latter were first used in a report by Domrich (1849). The emphasis of somatic medicine on the cardiorespiratory manifestations of the disorder differentiated it from psychological medicine which put the emphasis on anxiety. This split in diagnostic approach led to what Nemiah (1980) called ‘diagnostic diplopia’, as can be inferred from the various terms mentioned above reflecting one orientation or the other. Thus, among the somatic approaches the diagnosis ‘irritable heart’ – a functional syndrome with no evidence of structural lesion of the heart, as proposed by the physician DaCosta (1871) during the American Civil War – became an established medical diagnostic entity for many years.

From the psychiatric standpoint, it was Freud (1962) who, in his effort to disentangle the entity of anxiety neurosis from neurasthenia, chose anxiety, both its acute and chronic forms, as the most prominent feature of the former condition. This term ‘anxiety neurosis’ was officially established and remained essentially unchanged until the publication of the DSM-III (APA, 1980). In this landmark edition, the term was split into two different diagnoses: generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder.

In this paper, the rationale and the appropriateness of the latter term are critically examined from a historical perspective.

**The concept of ‘panic’ as a collective or individual fear reaction**

The word ‘panic’ derives from the Greek and describes the unpleasant state inflicted by the intervention of the god Pan. Originally the term ‘panic’
implied mainly collective and excessive fear reactions, associated with loss of
self-control and irrational flight, occurring whenever people were faced with
disasters (Consensus Statement, 1987; Lader and Marks, 1971: 16; Pichot,
1996, 1999). The linking of the god’s name with collective fear is credited to
Herodotus (Herodotus: 257–9). In the victorious battle of Marathon, the
Athenians were convinced that it was Pan who helped Greeks, putting the
Persians to flight.

It is hard to establish the documentation of panic as a term describing
psychiatric conditions, in the form of a sudden, unexpected, unjustified and
intense fear displayed by an individual. The ancient Greek physicians as well
as the Byzantine texts did not apply the term ‘panic’ to medico-psychiatric
conditions of anxiety attacks (Eftychiadis, 1983, 1995). Nevertheless, these
conditions did not escape the attention of the Tragics (Sophocles) (Stobaeus,
1543), Plato (Klein, 1996), Hippocrates (Hippocrates: 141) and Aretaeus
(Kotsopoulos, 1986).

According to Pichot (1999), writing about the modern European
languages, the Greek word ‘panikos’ first appeared in France in the
expression ‘peur panique’ created by Rabelais in 1594; it was then adopted in
English in 1603, and finally in German in the eighteenth century. Pichot
(1996, 1999) also credits Maudsley (1879) as being the first to apply the
term ‘panic’ to a specific psychiatric symptom (‘melancholic panic’).
Furthermore Berrios (1999) spotted the term ‘panophobia’ coined by Ribot
(1911) in the case of the patient who fears everything. Berrios (1999),
however, notes the objections to this term raised by Devaux and Logre
(1917) who suggested the more accurate term ‘pantophobia’ for these cases, as
‘panophobia’ etymologically refers to god Pan and not to what Ribot meant
to describe. The first official application of the term ‘panic’ was by Kempf
(1920) in 1920, under the category of ‘homosexual panic’, a term that – like
‘melancholic panic’ and ‘panophobia’ – bears little or no resemblance to the
current meaning of the term as established by the DSM-III.

However, it is possible that the first use of the term ‘panic’ to describe
individuals suffering from anxiety attacks and nightly fears might have occurred
much earlier. Written in the Middle Ages, martirologia (martyrology) and
synaxaria (legendaries) formed the roots of the old liturgical books Les
anciens Missels (Missel Quotidien, 1947). These liturgical books, in turn, cite
the words ‘la panique’ (panic) and ‘les frayeurs’ (fears) in reference to Abba St
Gilles who lived in the eighth century and was the healing saint for those
suffering from these maladies.

At any rate, the establishment of panic attack and panic disorder with
their current meaning into the official diagnostic systems is credited to
D. F. Klein (1964, 1993, 1996). Klein is recognized as the leading force in
this development; he challenged the prevailing view of pathological anxiety as
psychologically or environmentally driven, and stressed instead the under-
lying neurobiological underpinnings of this disorder. Thus, he and M. Fink
succeeded in their initial attempts to differentiate pharmacologically the anxiety that comes in an episodic form as anxiety attacks from other forms of anxiety (Klein and Fink, 1962). Furthermore, the adoption by Klein of the term ‘panic’ occurred while he was searching for a synonym for the anxiety attack, in order to clarify its distinction from chronic anticipatory anxiety (1996, 1999). When ‘the word panic popped out’, his most plausible explanation was that he remembered that word from the expression ‘panic attack’ which he might have read in a Freudian text. However, as pointed out by Pichot (1996, 1999), the original sentence written by Freud in France was ‘attaque d’angoisse’ (anxiety attack), wrongly translated as ‘state of panic’, an error corrected in a later edition. As it turned out, the establishment of the term ‘panic’ was based on an error in translation!

In spite of initial scepticism (Consensus Statement, 1987; Gelder, 1989), this diagnosis not only persisted but it also gained a clearer and more prominent status in the ‘wording and order of the DSM system’ from its first appearance in the DSM-III to the last two successive editions, DSM-III-R and DSM-IV (Compton, 1998). Thus, in the latter (APA, 1994), panic attack is defined as a discrete period of intense fear and discomfort associated with somatic and cognitive symptoms being developed abruptly and peaking within minutes. On the other hand, panic disorder is characterized by recurrent and unexpected episodes of panic attacks. Moreover, the patient is concerned about additional attacks and the implications or the consequences of the attacks, and so changes his/her behaviour in relation to the attacks. This condition is not due to medical or psychiatric disorder, or to drugs.

The Greek god Pan

In Greek mythology, a whole range of gods could cause mental diseases. Thus Hecate, a lunar goddess, caused epileptic insanity, Dionysus elation, Diana hysteria and Pan fear (Roccatagliata, 1986: 6, 71). Pan was the god of nature, fields, forests, streams, wild animals, flocks and shepherds. Living in the countryside, Pan’s haunts were the hills and the mountains, particularly those of his homeland, Arcadia and Mt Lycaeus. But Pan did not fit the popular image of a god (Barlow, 1988). He was very short and ugly, and was not completely human in form, since he possessed the ears, horns, legs and beard of a goat. His parents are variously named. Thus, depending on his father, he would be referred to by complex names, such as Titano-pan, Dio-pan, Hermo-pan. In case he was denied fatherhood, the name of Aegi-pan was also used to indicate his association with an ‘aega’, the Greek word for goat. His mother was usually thought to be a nymph: the daughter of Dryops, or Penelope. Everyone feared Pan because of his appearance and his screaming. Even his own mother ‘startled and fled and she abandoned the child, for she was frightened when she saw his coarse features and full beard’ (Hesiod: 443–7).
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But among the gods, Pan is unique in that we have not only information about his birth but also about his death. The news of his death came from Plutarch (Plutarch: 419) in the first century AD, who describes it as follows:

A sailor named Thamus heard a divine voice shouted across the sea ‘Thamus, are you there? When you reach Palodes, take care to proclaim that the great god Pan is dead.’

It seems that this is a crucial moment, because:

the cry which the sailors had heard towards the time of the Emperor Tiberius ‘the god Pan is dead’, as it was reported by Plutarch, marks the limit between the end of myth and the birth of new perception. From this moment on there would always be a distinction between the period before Christ and after Christ. (Roccataglia, 1986)

After Pan’s death, and with the prevalence of the new Christian beliefs, Pan was linked to the devil and the devil’s appearance. Furthermore, according to the new dogma, mental illness was the product of sin and/or the devil and people still could be treated through purification or by a capable priest. Thus, a new figure emerged to replace the image of Pan in his representation of episodic anxiety. The old liturgical books and book of Saints Les anciens Missels enlist Aegidios the Athenian, more widely known as St Gilles, within the fourteen healing saints (‘Les quatorze saint auxiliaires’) for people suffering from ‘la panique’ and ‘les frayeurs’ (Missel Quotidien, 1947).

According to Acta Sanctorum, a book of saints of questionable historic value, Aegidios was born in Athens during the seventh century, being the only son of a noble family. The names of his parents were Theodore and Pelagie (Coleti and Albrizzi, 1756). Ironically, his Greek name ‘Aegidios’ means ‘protection’ from the word ‘aegis’, a shield made of goat skin. Hence, an association between St Aegidios and his healing grace on the one hand, and goat-like Pan and his afflictions on the other, is obvious. While in Athens, Aegidios performed several miracles but eventually left the country, apparently to escape from unwanted publicity and fame. He went to Provence, France, where he became known by the name Gilles1 (Missel Quotidien, 1947) and founded the eponymous – and later famous – Saint Gilles Monastery. He died in 721 or 722. The tomb containing his relics was found in 1865, and the Catholic Church celebrates his memory on 1 September, when many devotees suffering from panic and related conditions visit the tomb to receive his grace and be cured.

Comparing panic disorder and Pan-induced panic

The main thesis of this paper is that the diagnostic label of panic, recruited almost accidentally by Klein (Pichot, 1996, 1999) and officially introduced by the DSM-III in 1980, was appropriate and, as it turned out, widely
approved and successful. By introducing this term, the DSM-III succeeded in several respects.

First, this new diagnostic label is free from any aetiologic connotations as opposed to such terms as ‘irritable heart’ and ‘hyperventilation syndrome’. It is obvious that both these terms are not purely descriptive but reflect or imply a theory, albeit unproven, about pathology and underlying mechanisms (van den Hout, 1996). Therefore, the new term satisfies the criterion of neutrality regarding unproven aetiology, a virtue highly desired and followed by the architects of the DSM-III.

The establishment of this term put an end to the terminological bifurcation between medical and psychiatric terms – Nemiah’s ‘diagnostic diplopia’ (Nemiah, 1980). The other names were all abandoned, being included under the DSM-III’s term ‘panic attack and panic disorder’. With few exceptions (Bandelow et al., 1996), this new diagnosis seems to have gained firm and wide acceptance, as indicated in the revealing title ‘Panic disorder’ – used in both a public service announcement by the National Institute of Mental Health and a *JAMA* editorial (Glass, 2000).

Most important, however, we argue that the troubles supposedly imposed on men by the intervention of god Pan carry with them all the essential defining features of the psychiatric condition that we currently call panic disorder (APA, 1994; Barlow et al., 1994). This claim should be justified by a comparative evaluation of the two conditions. DSM-IV’s criterion of intensity is an unquestionable attribute of fear and discomfort caused by Pan. Nymphs, people, his own mother, were all terribly afraid of Pan. ‘Even the other gods were subject to his terror and at his mercy,’ (Barlow, 1988) and a sudden shout from Goat-Pan was sufficient to put them to flight (Graves, 1960). Pan could make his appearance (attack) unexpectedly, thus satisfying an important definitional feature of panic disorder. Indeed, Pan could play frightening tricks on unwary travellers (Ley, 1992), and Barlow explains why:

> Pan had a habit of napping in a small cave or thicket near the road. When disturbed from his nap by a passer-by, he would let out a blood-curdling scream that was said to make one’s hair stand on end. (Barlow, 1988)

Similarly, Graves describes him as

> loving nothing better than his afternoon sleep, and revenged himself on those who disturbed him with a sudden loud shout from a grove, or grotto, which made the hair bristle on their heads. (Graves, 1960)

These descriptions fit well with the clinical observations that panics occur during relaxation (Barlow, 1988) and deepening non-rapid eye movement sleep (Mellman and Uhde, 1989a, 1989b), i.e., in situations in which there is lack of danger clues or cognitions (Klein, 1993), and underline the unexpected, the intense and the abrupt as well, as the somatic components of the panic
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attack. The description of victims as ‘unwary’ is also in line with the current finding that sympathetic activity is not elevated in patients with panic disorder when at rest (Wilkinson et al., 1998).

From a semantic point of view, the term ‘panic’, in contrast to terms that indicate passivity such as ‘fear’ and ‘terror,’ (i.e., ‘he is terrified’), introduces a more active element, implying flight or a disorganized behaviour (Pichot, 1996). This holds true especially for the victims of Pan who, full of dread, tried to avoid him, as Theocritus (p. 11) informs us:

No, no man; there’s no piping for me at high noon. I go in too great dread of Pan for that. I wot high noon’s his time for taking rest after the swink o’ the chase; and he’s one o’ the tetchy sort; his nostril’s ever sour wrath’s abiding-place.

Among the nymphs chased by Pan, Pitys escaped him only by being metamorphosed into a fir tree, Syrinx became a reed, and Echo became an echo. These are just a few examples indicating that the victims of the god Pan did worry about additional attacks, and the implications or the consequences of these attacks, thus changing their behaviour – as do patients with the DSM-IV diagnosis of panic disorder.

Pan, however, was not that bad. He was also full of spirit, amorous and easy-going (Graves, 1960). Ley (1992) describes Pan in a more sophisticated and sympathetic way:

A clever and mischievous fellow who frequently used disguises to mask his true identity . . . Although Pan often wore disguises that aided him in his cruel and mischievous behavior, he was a safeguard for those who believed in him, for those who saw him for what he was – a complex and many-sided figure.

After all, Pan possessed no weapons for his defence, other than his appearance and his cry. The magnitude and the seriousness of his threat, if any, depend entirely on the recipient’s perception of the threat, as Pan’s weapons cause no harm by themselves. It is obvious then that this feature of ‘weaponlessness’ harmoniously stands for the DSM-IV requirement that panic is not due to a medical or psychiatric illness, in striking contrast to what the victims of panic believe when experiencing such ‘noisy symptoms’.

This brief comparative evaluation thus reveals remarkable similarities between the DSM-IV defined panic disorder and the afflictions induced by Pan, suggesting that the mythological concept of panic encapsulates all the particulars of this specific anxiety state, as currently defined. Awareness of the mythological origins and characteristics of the terms ‘panic attack’ and ‘panic disorder’ may enhance clinicians’ understanding of this condition and its differences from other forms of acute anxiety or from more chronic or diffuse background anxiety states.
Closing remarks

Although Pan was declared dead by Plutarch, this may not be so. Barlow maintains that Pan’s power is experienced daily by millions. In fact, panic may be so common, so widespread and so much a part of our experience that we have managed to overlook its importance (Barlow, 1988). Klein (1964, 1993, 1996; Klein and Fink, 1962) and modern psychiatry (APA, 1980) have re-instituted Pan’s name, paying tribute to the god’s complex involvement with men’s affairs. One might wonder why the diagnostic label of panic had to wait for so many years before its official and accidental psychiatric use, just twenty years ago. Could it be because Pan ‘frequently used disguises to mask his true identity?’ (Ley, 1992).

Pan may not be dead, in spite of Graves’ statement that ‘Pan is the only god who has died in our time’, for, as Graves realizes, the sailor Thamus may have misheard the ceremonial lament: ‘the all-great Tammuz is dead!’ (Thamus Pan-megas Tethnece) as ‘Thamus, Great Pan is dead’ (Graves, 1960). In any case, Pan, like Narcissus, Oedipus and Adonis has been immortalized through the widespread use of his name in modern psychiatry.

ENDNOTES

2. Tammuz: the king of Egypt residing in Thebes.

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THE TERM ‘PANIC DISORDER’


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