

A Review of Gender Differences in Experience and Expressions of Anger

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Abstract

The basic impression that most psychologists have about gender and ethnic differences in anger is that men and members of minority groups are more likely to experience intense feelings of anger and resentment. Men are expected to express anger openly, while women are supposed to feel more depressed and suppress their anger. This paper remains a humble attempt at exploring the various aspects of experience and expression of anger in different genders and in different stages of life, namely adolescence and adulthood.

KEYWORDS: male, female, anger, experience, expression, adolescence, adult

Introduction:

The basic impression that most psychologists have about gender and ethnic differences in anger is that men and members of minority groups are more likely to experience intense feelings of anger and resentment. Men are expected to express anger openly, while women are supposed to feel more depressed and suppress their anger because they are afraid to express it and because it is unladylike to "lose your temper." Men, on the other hand are encouraged to express their feelings of anger because it is part of the achievement-oriented, aggressive, macho, and masculine role image that is reinforced in our society. It is as if a man's worth in our society were viewed by his achievements while a woman's values were judged by the successfulness of her relationships. In the not so distant past, self-esteem was evaluated in terms of one's fulfillment of roles that were tied to strong gender stereotypes. For a man, his worth and value to himself and his family depended on his occupation, his job, his earnings. For a woman, her survival was seen as dependent on her relationships -- particularly the success of her marriage. In the context of these stereotypes, when a man lost his fortune he lost his pride, self-respect, and confidence in his ability to cope with life. Precisely the same process is believed to occur in women who lose important love relationships. For both men and women, the losses are thought to result in depression and low self-esteem. And although these image and self-worth differences are based on strong sex-role stereotypes, many of us -- some more strongly than others -- believe that they do influence how males and females cope with stress and frustration.

Developmental studies, for example, indicate that there are gender differences in both the traits developed and the time of their occurrence. Interestingly enough, boys are more likely to be aggressive and belligerent at every stage, and their psychomotor skills develop earlier while their cognitive and language capacity lags behind girls. Furthermore, a large amount of information has been gained about the role of male and female anger in interrelationships from observations of children while they are playing. During play activities, boys are more aggressive -- constantly yelling, arguing, and

fighting. No matter how rough or how violent the activities become -- playing continues and goes on. Girls, on the other hand, will bring play to a halt if things become too rough. In many such instances, the girls refuse to continue playing; they simply walk away from the situation. Moreover, it appears as if girls will do their most to preserve the friendship and relationship with their playmates, while boys are consumed by a passionate desire to beat each other up or chase each other until someone is declared the winner. Are these differences the roots of a gender difference in the experience and expression of anger?

Sociological Factors:

Few studies have been conducted directly to examine gender differences in the experience and expression of anger. The lack of research on this topic and the failure to question the belief that men are more prone to experience anger than women is like assuming simply that the women who stay in bad relationships love too much and the men do not love enough. In any event, the truth of the matter is that the connection between anger and gender is not simple. For example, research methods to determine how or why people experience anger and how this troubling emotion is expressed, suppressed, and controlled often vary from study to study. Some researchers rely on the psychological testing techniques that derive data from responses to questionnaires, while others gather information by asking people questions about real and recent experiences. For the most part, anger -- like other emotions -- is not a discrete and static event that involves a single stimulus and single response. Anger is a complex emotional response that includes elements of past injustices and provocations, along with a desire to change the behavior of the culprit. Anger also involves the expression of frustration and dislike for the object of the anger episode, and the experience of a wide variety of emotions (guilt, shame, rage, embarrassment, depression) before, during and following the anger. Because the word "anger" is so often used interchangeably to describe hostility and aggression, it does not take much stretching of the imagination to see why males would be perceived culturally as more likely than females to behave in an aggressive and angry manner when faced with threat and provocation. And researchers are now beginning to gather convincing scientific data that support this notion. Studies of human males and nonhuman primate males suggest that there may be a positive relationship between testosterone levels in adolescence and adulthood, and certain forms of aggressive behavior. However, a positive relationship is not necessarily a causal linkage. In this case, the relationship between testosterone and aggression may be a function of other factors that were not considered. Researchers in Norway, however, did take the time to make a convincing test of the hypothesis that testosterone influences aggressive behavior. In this study, Dan Olweus and his colleagues selected 58 healthy boys of 15- 17years old from the public school district of Solna, of Stockholm Sweden. The boys completed a number of personality inventories, including measures of verbal and physical aggression. Peer ratings provided information about each boy's habitual level of aggressive behavior (e.g., starts fights; verbal aggression against teachers; unprovoked verbal aggression against peers). In addition to these variables, detailed information about the boys' temperamental characteristics and rearing conditions during childhood had been obtained from their mothers and fathers when the boys were 13 yearsold. The basic findings of this study suggest that circulating levels of testosterone in the blood plasma have a direct causal influence on provoked aggressive behavior. High levels of testosterone also lead to

an increased readiness to respond vigorously and assertively to provocations and threats. In the study, high levels of testosterone made the boys more impatient and irritable, which in turn increased their propensity to engage in aggressive-destructive behavior.

Several studies have examined the relationship between testosterone and criminal violence among prison inmates. For example, James Dabbs and colleagues determined that inmates with the highest testosterone concentrations had more often been convicted of violent crimes. The relationship between testosterone and violence was most notable at the extremes of the testosterone distribution -- where 9 out of the 11 inmates with the lowest testosterone levels had committed nonviolent crimes, and 10 out of the 11 inmates with the highest levels had committed violent crimes. Interestingly, among those inmates convicted of nonviolent crimes, those with the highest testosterone levels received longer terms to serve before parole and longer punishments for disciplinary infractions (generally assaultive behavior)s while in prison. Overall, the average testosterone level for inmates rated by their peers as "tough" were no different from those rated as "weak." Actually, testosterone was related to peer ratings of toughness, but only among inmates living within the weaker dormitories. The "weaker" dormitories were described in the study report as less intense and wild, and the researchers believed that the peer ratings could have been more reliable for men living in the weaker and calmer dorms. In any event, testosterone was highest only among those inmates in the weaker dorms who were rated as tougher by their peers. Although there appears to be fairly good evidence then, for a hormonal basis of aggressive behavior in males, the findings from the available studies on this topic do not preclude the possibility that early learning experiences are important determinants of aggressive behavior in both males and females. Ernest H. Johnson (1990) in his book titled *The Deadly Emotions: The Role of Anger, Hostility, and Aggression in Health and Emotional Well-Being* reveals that his researches showed adolescent females had somewhat higher trait anger/temperament scores than adolescent males. This finding indicates that, at least among adolescents, females have a stronger tendency to experience intense feelings of anger more frequently -- particularly in situations where they feel they are being evaluated unfairly or threatened. Adolescent males, on the other hand, scored significantly higher than females on psychological measures indicating that they react with more intense angry reactions when they are pressured by time and deadlines. The overall pattern of these findings indicated that adolescent males and females do differ in their likelihood to experience anger, and these differences are dependent on the social situation that is the stimulus and cause of the provocation. Neither sex had any great difficulty expressing anger outwardly at objects or other people. In other words, male and female adolescents did not differ in their likelihood of doing things like slamming doors, throwing things, being nasty, making sarcastic remarks, or arguing with others. However, the two sexes were different in their likelihood of suppressing anger and irritability. Adolescent males were more likely than females to do things like pout or sulk, harbor grudges, withdraw from people, be angrier than willing to admit, at the time, and feel irritation a great deal more than the people in their environment realized. Further analysis of the differences between males and females revealed that, regardless of gender, adolescents with a high level of suppressed anger were more likely to report experiencing strong anxiety and fear about expressing their anger. On the other hand, it was discovered

that the frequent outward expression of anger was determined mainly by the frequency with which anger itself was experienced.

Judith Siegel found that adolescents who get angry quite often tend to be overweight, relatively sedentary at school and on the job, and more likely to be characterized as Type-A. Adolescents who frequently experience anger that is directed outward tend to be anxious, have elevated blood pressure, and are relatively sedentary during leisure time. Smoking, the occurrence of negative life events, and low self-esteem are associated with both the frequent experience of anger in many social situations and the outward expression of anger. The conclusions that can be drawn about gender differences in the experience and expression of anger among adolescents can be summed up in the following manner:

- a) There are a few strong and consistent differences that appear to depend on the social situations associated with the provocation. For adolescent males, these social situations tend to involve the stress and frustration of time pressures; for females, the situations are more likely to include unfair evaluation and threat.
- b) Adolescent males are more likely than females to suppress their feelings of anger, while both sexes are similar in the degree to which anger is expressed outwardly at other people and objects in the environment. There is also good evidence that testosterone has an important role in aggressive behavior among males, but early learning experiences are also undoubtedly important determinants of aggressive behavior. Several recent studies of chronic adolescent offenders -- both males and females -- apprehended for assaultive crimes have revealed that, when parents tolerate violence in the home, this acceptance of hostility and aggression is generalized by the adolescent to outside the home as a method of resolving interpersonal and social conflicts.
- c) There is some evidence that destructive associations between anger and behaviors detrimental to good health (e.g., smoking, elevated blood pressure, psychological stress, sedentary lifestyle, Type-A behavior, inadequate social ties with family and close friends) are found in adolescents. Although it is not possible to predict whether that the interrelationships between anger and these risk factors will contribute to poor health, and thus the management of anger needs to be targeted for modification early in life.

Researchers have used various methods to assess anger. In one study, psychologists Douglas Frost and James Averill recruited a large sample of men and women (age 21-60 years) and interviewed them about recent experiences of anger. All participants responded to questions about some real anger episode that had occurred within the previous week. Unlike the questionnaire measures of anger, the findings derived from this interview of adults revealed very few differences between men and women. Both men and women were most likely to have gotten angry at (1) someone they love (spouse, lover, parents); and then, (2) situations that involved an arbitrary violation of their rights and expectations; and then (3) someone who attacked their self-worth and self-esteem, or someone who had wrongly evaluated their performance. Both men and women reported feeling entitled to express their anger because the person(s) involved in the anger episode was well aware of what he or she (or they) was doing, and had no right to do it. Thus, men and women apparently justify their reactions in the same

way when they feel angry. The majority of men and women (58 percent) reported that they had expressed their anger outwardly, while 13 percent reacted aggressively (hitting, slapping, throwing things, slamming doors). Both men and women were similar in the degree to which they would take their anger out on a third person or object, talk to the target of the provocation, or try to calm themselves down in private. There were essentially no differences in the degree of guilt, shame, and embarrassment experienced by men and women following anger episodes. Approximately two-thirds of the men and women also said they felt hostile and aggravated, while about 50 percent felt depressed, anxious, and nervous following the recent provocation. About a third of the group said they felt relieved and satisfied about expressing their anger. In fact, both men and women cited the same reasons for expressing anger: to change the behavior of the target; to assert authority; to strengthen the relationship with the target of the provocation; or to let off steam and express dislike. More women than men said they were likely to cry when they felt anger, and to deny the object of their anger some customary benefit such as a nice home cooked meal. To a certain extent, differences in the perception of anger for women and men may be related to a hypothesis derived from the research of psychologist James Averill, suggesting that people with stronger norms against aggression will account for their own angry feelings and aggression by interpreting it as passion -- that is, as being the result of an external cause and due to uncontrollable circumstances. 18 In this context, women -- who are generally believed to have stronger norms against aggression and hostility -- would be expected to account for angry feelings and aggression by perceiving an angry provocation as being externally caused and uncontrollable more so than men would. In a recent study to examine this hypothesis, M. Egerton had a group of women and men evaluate an angry incident as if they had taken part in it themselves. Overall, the women picked out more conflict in the angry episode than the men did, but the women had a low consensus in using "passion" schemes to explain the angry episode. On the other hand, the men had high consensus in using passion schemes. In other words, men (more so than women) with strong norms against angry aggression were more likely to interpret the angry episode as externally caused and uncontrollable. In another condition where the protagonist wept, there was a greater consensus among the women in using a passion scheme to explain the episode, but no consensus among the men. Overall, the results obtained in this study suggest that sex role has an important effect on the appropriateness of the strategy used to explain angry aggression episodes.

Conclusion:

Perhaps, as discussed earlier, people perceive the catalyst for self-esteem and self-worth of men and women as originating from different places. The worth of a man might be more strongly tied to his occupation, achievements, and "public image" -- the image that others have of him -- while a woman's worth may be strongly linked to the integrity of her relationships. These findings do not suggest that one sex has a greater problem with anger than the other; they simply indicate that men and women differ in their perceptions of the causes of anger. Psychologist Don Fritzd discovered that the location of the anger episode (at work, at home, in public) is one of the most important factors determining how men and women act and behave when they are angry. For example, in public places, women are as likely as men to feel angry when

provoked or treated rudely, but men are more likely than women to express their anger openly or use their anger to do something to change the situation. The story about anger in the work environment is quite different though. Although both men and women cited work as the location in which feelings of anger and irritability are most often experienced, the sexes did not differ in the degree to which anger was expressed at work. These findings are similar to, but a little at odds with, those of Ernest Harburg. In his random sample of men and women living in Detroit, the majority of the working-class men said that they would protest directly to an unjust and angry boss and also report the boss to the union. Although there was no difference between men and women in these reactions, women were more likely than men to be reflective in their encounters with an angry and unjust boss. In other words, women were more likely to bypass the anger and focus on a problem solving approach to the provocation by talking to the boss about the episode at a later time. Not only does it seem that this approach to dealing with anger in the work place would produce less stress, but also findings by Harburg and his associates showed that adults who respond to an angry boss with reflection have lower blood pressures than individuals who use other anger-coping styles. It is even possible that the pressures on the modern-day working woman are of a magnitude far greater than those on her male counterpart, who does not have her multiple pressures of being a career woman, mother, and wife. Women are likely to develop a conflict between the traditional ideal of nurturance and the importance of family relationships on the one hand and the desires for independence, achievement, mastery, and current female sex-role ideals on the other and thus the woman working outside the home experiences a great degree of emotional distress -- guilt, anxiety, anger, shame -- over this conflict.

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