

*A Phenomenological Sketch*

*Anger*

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[ <http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboree/anger.html> ]

The following phenomenological sketch is based on the work of several Qualitative Methods classes, using self-generated protocols and analyzed by means of the "workshop" method.

## Precursors of anger

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It is common for us to be in some sort of "bad mood" prior to getting angry. Often, we have had a bad day, have been overworked or are overtired. Perhaps we aren't feeling well physically. Quite commonly, we have been drinking – it seems clear that alcohol somehow opens us up to anger and other emotions, perhaps by loosening our usual control over ourselves.

Another thing that can set us up for anger is our personalities or temperaments. Some people are predisposed towards dealing with all problems with anger. I find that people who are relatively self-centered (as opposed to "other-centered") fall into an emotional response to problems more easily than others.

The environment or setting may play part as well. Certain settings are more conducive to anger than others: If things are noisy, confusing, or exiting in general; if you are a witness to anger or aggression; if you're in a place even associated with anger or aggression; if anger is in some way encouraged....

Mood, personality, and setting, while important variables, are not essential to anger. However, a mood based on internal problems or other problems can become anger when triggered by some small but immediate problem. When this happens, we often notice that "that's not what you're really angry about," i.e. the small problem isn't the real one.

## Causes

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Words used to describe the "triggers" of anger include being wronged, lack of justice, betrayal, mistreatment, resentment, being dumped on, having one's space or person invaded, having social norms violated, reputation hurt, being made to feel helpless, frustration, blocking of goals, lack of control, and so on.

The commonality (essence) among all these events is that there has been a violation of expectations, of the order of your reality, especially in reference to one's personal order, i.e. one's identity. In other words, we respond to a situation with a sense that this shouldn't be happening, especially not to me. There is a certain way things should be: I have rights, I have my pride, my reputation; what I do is my business, I should be able to complete it, it should work out as I expected it would; this is the way things are done in this society, and certain variations introduce chaos and cannot be permitted; the world has a certain lawfulness to it, including perhaps a justice that is above any merely social law, and you or this event violates that lawfulness.

It is clear, though, that not everyone responds to these situations with anger. We might also feel fear, and run away, or sadness and make an effort at adjusting ourselves to the violation.

There is good reason to believe that, if we look carefully, anger is not the first feeling we have, that some other feelings come before it. First comes a distressed awareness of things being out-of-joint. Anxiety might be a good word for it. It is also a possibility that anger comes before sadness, that even those of us who readily accept things and learn to live with them have some experience of anger before we accept. So, one thing that distinguishes anger from other responses to problems might be its position, i.e. second.

More concretely, anger involves an active response to the problem. Anger sees the problem as "out

there" rather than "in here," and it sees it as something to be confronted, rather than run away from.

Although most of our anger comes from people, we can become angry at just about anything. We can become angry at things, such as when we have a flat tire. It prevents us from doing what we want, it takes away our control of our own lives, and therefore makes us angry.

We can also become angry at ourselves, as when we do something stupid. You can only do this when you can separate yourself as victim from yourself as cause, i.e. if you can "externalize" one part of you, so that you can blame "it" without acknowledging your own need to adapt. It's always a "stupid mistake." If you push someone who is angry at themselves, they will quickly become angry at you. If it is fully accepted, it becomes sadness instead.

We also experience vicarious anger, that is, we get angry at things that happen to others, even when these things don't impact on us. This may be just a matter of, again our own sense of justice being violated; it may also be due to our ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes (sympathy, empathy, compassion...).

One person put it nicely: He said that anger comes from your soul, i.e. from your identity, from who you are. Despite all the physical and behavioral effects so easily associated with anger, it is basically "from your soul."

## Body

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The bodily correlates of anger are clear, even when we are only a little angry. The heart rate changes, predominantly upwards, and the heartbeat seems louder. Breathing is labored and faster. The hairs on the body often stand up, giving us "gooseflesh." The body, and especially the face, tend to feel hot, flushed, and we may redden. We may feel light-headed, or that our blood has collected in our heads. Our skin, especially the hands, can become clammy. Our eyes may tear. We tend to get a light (and sometimes severe) stomach upset, often described as "a sinking feeling." Our mouths and throats often seem dry, and our throats feel constricted.

Our muscles become tensed. This is often felt as a build-up of pressure, a feeling like we are about to explode. We may become "hyperactive," pacing, touching and handling objects restlessly, grinding our teeth, clenching our fists, tapping our feet. Our speech tends to become louder and faster.

All this tension can make us tired, give us headaches, neckaches, backaches, and the like, especially if we are "holding it in." But generally, we feel as if we have a great abundance of physical energy, as if we were stronger than usual.

## Perceptions

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We also become hyperalert, at least to events relevant to our anger. That is, we are ready, or set, to perceive some things and not others. Our attention is, of course, focussed on the object of our anger, as if it were likely to be a source of further trouble. It has become dangerous.

We also focus on the anger itself, dwelling on it. Our thoughts spin, "feeding" it by recalling other injustices. It has a "snowballing" aspect to it, with a real sense of loss of control. The anger runs us,

not the other way around. We are "consumed" by it, it "eats" at us.

There is a sense of the animal in us when we are angry. It has an reflexive or instinctive quality to it, which we expect others to understand. If someone were to ask us, especially while we were angry, why we were angry, we tend to be put off: Wouldn't anyone get angry in this circumstance? The anger is felt as a violation of a universal rule, not just our own particular need or desire. (Hence, it is very hard to reason with an angry person!)

Our focus is narrowed, like tunnel vision. The rest of the world "vanishes" or at least becomes insignificant. If the world – especially other people, even friends – forces itself on us, we address our anger at it as well. For example, if a friend tries to calm us down, we may push them away or tell them to shut up. We are not terribly tolerant. And we can't seem to find pleasure in anything.

We lose our perspective – precisely what we need to regain control – and begin to see the world as a hostile place, and life as intrinsically unfair. We may become paranoid and interpret all things through the anger. We "see red," see things as if they were too close, intruding on us.

With effort, we may gain some control, but it is difficult, and the anger is always underneath the control ("seething"). Any lapse of attention, and we are angry again. Sadly, at this time when we need our "coping strategies" the most, they are least available to us.

The essence of all this is that we feel as if a certain way of looking at things has been forced on us, that we must see things in this angry way. Anything that might lead us out of the anger is ignored or reinterpreted. We are not ourselves when we are angry.

## Desires

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There is a goal through all this: We desire to return a situation prior to the event that triggered our anger. Basically, this translates into an effort at removing or destroying the person, thing, or event, or anything that approximates removing or destroying, such as diminishing ("cutting him down to size," for example). But anything else is just a substitute. This desire is hard to satisfy: You just can't reverse time.

## Resolution

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There are several options: The most obvious one is aggression. It is a physical effort at changing the world back into a state that approximates the one you started with, i.e. destroying or diminishing the culprit. We want to re-establish a just world, a lawful world, where things go as they should. We want satisfaction, meaning that the other must suffer as you suffered. This is "only fair."

Aggression doesn't necessarily mean physical aggression: verbal aggression is very popular. As symbolic creatures, words can hurt even more than blows. We "shoot him down," we "cut him to pieces," we "destroy him."

Very close to verbal aggression is confrontation, expressing your feelings, "venting" them. This can be a step towards dealing with the problem in a "civilized" way, but it tends to degenerate into verbal aggression.

If you vent, verbally assault, or actually attack, there is a curiously positive feeling. It does feel good, at least to the extent that you feel successful. A single knock-out punch, as an extreme example, can change the uncomfortable physical tensions and narrow psychological focus into a rather intense, amphetamine-like high. You may smile, even laugh.

We can also displace our anger, such as by punching a pillow or kicking the dog (or one's spouse or child). This is ultimately unsatisfying, and yet does provide immediate satisfaction, and so may become habitual.

The second major approach is to suppress the anger. We may leave the situation or attempt to distract ourselves. Most of us are taught to bury the anger, in the cause of "civilization." However, we tend to feel even worse when we do these things: We may cry, develop headaches and other tension problems, lose sleep, etc. And psychologically, we feel impotent, weak, hopeless. We may berate ourselves, rehearsing things we should have done or said, and retreat from social interaction for a while. It is as if we admitted, for example, that the nasty things said to us were in fact true.

The anger turns to sadness. Over time, it dies down, assisted perhaps by what some refer to as a "good cry." But the original problem, the original injustice remains, and we may dream about it, occasionally recall it, develop a "grudge," become generally irritable, and, if similar situations occur, our new anger may be fed by the unresolved situation.

In either case – aggression or suppression – we may imagine aggression, and it can be considerably more cruel and dramatic in our imaginations than in reality. The imaginings are pleasurable but, since they don't actually set things right, they can become habitual. Some then feel the need to suppress the imaginings...!

The third approach is the most reasonable, perhaps, and certainly the most sophisticated. We can restructure the situation in our minds, so that it is no longer a violation. That is, you can distance yourself a bit, get a little perspective, step back and assess, see the big picture, etc. Sometimes, in the middle of an angry or even aggressive situation, you will suddenly realize what you're doing, begin to hear what you are saying, and you will be able to extract yourself from the anger.

It is hard to say whether this is truly rational or at least partly defensive, i.e. are we restructuring things, or are we distorting reality. If someone attacks you and you realize that they were not in control of themselves at the time, you can restructure, forgive and forget, and go on. If, on the other hand, a real injustice is happening, explaining it away or shrugging it off as none of your business is avoiding responsibility.

Some people say "I don't get angry; I get even." This too qualifies as a restructuring: They turn the situation from one to which they react to one to which they address their powers. It becomes a challenge. This can be positive or negative: Are we clearing the street of drug dealers, or are we vigilantes, seeking vengeance, "a tooth for a tooth?"

Generally, the dissipation of anger, at least of its physical symptoms, is rather slow, even if you strike out. This again leads us to believe it has powerful physiological support. But it does dissipate. The physical aspect reverses itself, your psychological processes return to you, and so on. You may even feel better afterwards. You don't really store up anger – but you can recreate it over and over again if the problem hasn't been rectified.

Finally, it must be noted that anger is a "normal" state, not a pathological one. There may be better ways to deal with problems, but this is a very human one.

## The essence of anger

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I believe anger is our response to a violation of what we perceive to be the rules of reality when we additionally perceive that we cannot and should not adapt to that violation, that its source is out there and should be changed.

Anger tends to be greater if the rules violated are social ones, and even greater when the rules concern us personally. It is so personal and social that, when our anger is directed at things, we act in ways that would only be effective with people, e.g. kicking and cursing at that flat tire)

Anger is strongly tied to physiological effects, clearly ones that energize us for action. The famous "fight or flight" comes to mind. It appears to be a primitive, animal-like, instinctive process that, while thoroughly human, nevertheless is antagonistic to other human values.

Perceptually, we change in the same way, i.e. we become more alert to the source of our anger, less aware of the things not relevant. Unfortunately, reasonableness is overwhelmed – presumably not relevant to what has become an emergency way-of-being.

Our goal is a return to "normality," to justice, lawfulness.... To the extent that this is not feasible, we attempt to approach the goal as best as we can.

Depending on our training, the strength of our anger, any temperamental inclinations we may have, the situation, etc., we may take a direct approach, perhaps involving aggression or at least verbal aggression, or we may attempt to suppress the anger (restoring normality by changing ourselves), or we may attempt to reassess the situation, i.e. make it non-violating and therefore not anger-producing. The effectiveness of any one of these varies greatly, and each has its advantages and drawbacks.