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# **Work in Progress**

## **The Construction of Anger in Women and Men**

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**Wellesley Centers for Women**  
**Wellesley College**  
Wellesley, MA 02481

**No.4**  
1985

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# The Construction of Anger in Women and Men

Jean Baker Miller, M.D.

## **About the Author**

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## **Abstract**

*While our culture constantly evokes anger, it also places constraints on the expression of anger. The constraints for women are different, and more restrictive, than those for men. Women's assigned subordinate position generates anger. Women's traditional roles and internalized cultural concepts of "femininity," however, entwine to characterize their expressions of anger as pathological. Men, in contrast, are encouraged to act aggressively. Nonetheless, as boys they typically learn to suppress and deflect anger so that their genuine understanding of the emotional experience of anger is questionable. A new conceptualization, acceptance, and constructive use of anger could lead both women and men to more honest, direct communication and action.*

Almost everyone agrees that our society has problems with anger. We often say that we have "too much aggression, violence, or hatred." While this certainly seems true, several questions can be raised about the postulate, particularly the basic thinking which leads to the quantitative term, "too much."

In contrast, I would first like to suggest that we suffer from *constraints* which prevent us from expressing anger and even from knowing when we are experiencing anger—constraints which are different for members of each sex.

Second, even as the expression of anger is constrained, I believe that we live in a milieu which continuously produces anger—at the societal level and during the course of individual psychological development—for both sexes, but differently for each.

Third, there is a possibility that the very conditions which produce so much anger grow out of the reality that the expression of anger has been encouraged *differentially*—predominantly for one sex only.

Fourth, if the first three issues are valid, they may have influenced our very conception of what anger is and how it originates.

I shall begin this discussion with some observations on women's experience, then move to a few notions about parts of men's experience. Finally, I will return to reconsider these initial issues.

It is important to define the term, *anger*, because there has been great variation in its usage. The topic has been studied by many workers in several disciplinary traditions (Miller et al., 1981). To sort the complicated lexicography, however, would take several papers in itself; as an alternative, I should like to formulate provisional definitions at the end of this lecture. For the moment, let us start with the word anger and go along with whatever that word means to each of us.

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## Women and anger

In speaking about this subject, there is an immediate problem: One topic most people really don't want to hear about is women's anger! Our culture (and others) has a long history of surrounding this topic with dread and denial. Within psychological fields, there has been frequent use of such terms as "castrating women" and the like, but it is hard to locate any place at which women's anger enters as a "proper" phenomenon. It is virtually always pathological.

Perhaps a description of a real person, whom I'll call Anita, will help to make this more concrete: Anita was a married woman in her 50s who had spent her adult life contributing as well as she could to the growth and development of her husband and four children. At her first therapy visit, she was depressed, and she cried almost continuously as she told of how inadequate and worthless she felt. She conveyed subtle hints of anger as well as clues that she was probably quite critical of several people, particularly her husband; but overtly she criticized only herself. At the same time, she clearly looked to her husband to provide affirmation and validation of her worth—and this is true for many women, even today.

In the past, I might have seen her anger as repressed and unreasonable, hence an indication of "pathology." Probably, too, I would have seen her as a woman who was "dependent" on her husband and therefore had problems with excess "dependency." I could have cited her need for her husband's affirmation as further evidence of her "poor sense of self." And all of this would have added up rapidly to a common diagnostic picture.

In a well-intentioned attempt to relieve Anita's depression, I might have thought it important to help her see her anger and its irrationality.

I believe now that such a course is wrong, but that belief follows from a reexamination of women's anger.

We live in an androcentric (male-centered) society—that is, one which is organized in terms of the experience of men as they have been able to define it and elaborate on it. This elaboration is called "culture" and "knowledge." The society also is largely patriarchal, in that men (of a certain group) have held all of the legitimate leadership, power, and authority. But even if one does not feel familiar with all of the connotations of the word *patriarchy*, one can think of the conditions set in motion in any set of relationships which are structured so that one group is dominant and another is subordinate, whether the relationship is based on sex, class, race, or other characteristics. All historical evidence indicates that once a group is con-

stituted as a dominant group, it behaves in predictable ways. Some of these are:

- It tends to act destructively to subordinate groups.
- It restricts the subordinate group's range of actions—and even reactions to destructive treatment.
- It does not encourage subordinates' full and free expression of their experience.
- It characterizes subordinates falsely.
- It describes this as the normal situation—usually the "natural" situation, ordered and ordained by higher and better powers, ranging from God to "biology."

Subordinates usually are dependent on dominants economically, socially, and politically. Their experience and views are excluded from the culture and do not form the base for the construction of what is called "knowledge."

Obviously, any subordinate is in a position which constantly generates anger. Yet this is one of the emotions that no dominant group ever wants to allow in subordinates. (No industrialist ever wanted the workers to be angry; no empire builder ever wanted the "natives to be restless.") Although the direct reasons for fear of subordinates' anger may seem obvious, this fear can become magnified in an intricate fashion in the minds of dominants. In addition, the suppression of anger is reinforced psychologically in the minds of the subordinates in many ways. I'll review just a few:

First, direct force has to be obviously available, even if it only lurks quietly in the background. For example, in this society only recently have we become more fully aware of the threat of physical violence which has always been exerted against women; but many women have known the private experience of beatings, rape, and other forms of brutality—or the threats of such force. The threat of social and economic deprivation also is a form of force, and, in general, men have controlled such resources.

Second, it is usually made to appear that subordinates have no *cause* for anger; if they feel anything like it, there is something wrong *with them*. They are uncivilized natives, dumb workers, sinful or unloved women—or, in modern parlance, "sick," maladjusted, and the like.

Growing up then, within the admonition to be "normal"—that is, to comply with the requirements of the situation—subordinates often develop several more complex psychological tendencies. These complicated characteristics often rest on a variation of some of the following inner beliefs:

(1) *I am weak*. This can effectively stamp out hints of anger near their start, because to feel angry can produce immediate fear of overpowering retaliation.

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tion. There is usually the accompanying belief that this weakness is inherent and that one is permanently incapable of developing greater strength.

(2) *I am unworthy.* Harboring this belief, one then becomes afraid of having any anger, because it appears to mean that anger will only deepen her or his sense of self-denigration.

(3) *I have "no right" and "no cause" to be angry.* This may be the most basic feeling of all; it underlies everything else. After all, if the whole world is said to be organized rightfully and properly, the subordinate person comes to believe that she or he certainly has no right to be angry. If the person feels any anger, that feeling can only intensify her or his sense of defectiveness, irrationality, and worthlessness.

The three characteristics are a few of the many which can arise for all subordinate groups. For women, there have been additional specific dimensions, particularly on the psychological level. These can be summarized by saying that women generally have been led to believe that their identity, as women, is that of persons who should be almost totally without anger and without the *need* for anger. Therefore, anger feels like a threat to women's central sense of identity, which has been called *femininity*. In recent years, Bernardez (1976, 1978), Lerner (1977), Zilbach et al. (1979), Nadelson et al. (1982), and Miller et al. (1981, 1981a) have written on this point and its several clinical manifestations.

A major exception may be noted. There is one place in which anger and aggressive action have been permitted to women—usually spoken of in terms of an animal metaphor—that is, in defense of her young, as a lioness defends her cubs. In such an instance, as in almost everything, the woman is allowed anger *in the interest of someone else*.

Many of the tendencies noted above follow from a basic point which underlies the interdiction of women's anger: Women are not supposed to use their own activity for their own self-initiated and self-defined goals or for their own development. From very early in life, women have been led to believe that their life activities should be for others and that their main task is to make and maintain relationships—relationships that serve others. This situation merits careful examination. Because of it, women develop many valuable psychological strengths, but that point warrants a long discussion (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982). The problem is that these very valuable strengths have not developed in a context of mutuality, and they have not been complemented by the full right and necessity to attend to one's own development as well.

The situation complicates problems of anger. As Bernardez (1978) has written, to be angry can feel to

women as if it will disrupt a relationship—at least it seems so in our culture. This factor alone exerts a powerful weight, making women afraid to feel the first stirring of anger. Once more, a stark reality is that most women live in relationships based on economic and social dependence, which leads to a realistic basis for fearing their disruption. There is great risk in disturbing the relationships which provide one's economic sustenance and one's whole psychological place in the world. Simultaneously, living in this kind of dependency continually generates anger.

All of these tendencies and their complications can lead to spiraling phenomena. For example, even small degrees of anger feel dangerous to a woman. Therefore she does not express the anger. Repeated instances of suppressing the anger can produce repeated experiences of frustration and inaction. The experiences of inaction and ineffectiveness lead to feelings of weakness and lack of self-esteem, which can increase the woman's sense of feeling unworthy and inferior. Feeling more inferior and unworthy makes a person more angry. Such spiraling situations can come to fill so much of a woman's psychological "space" that she can begin to have a skewed sense of herself. She begins to feel "full of anger," which then surely seems irrational and unwarranted. All the while this is really a false inner picture of her total psychological situation. But, very importantly, it is one which the external world—so-called "reality"—is only too ready to confirm, because any anger is too much anger in women. Indeed, the risk of expressing anger can appear grave and disorganizing. (Many women use a metaphor of a bottomless well of anger which they are afraid to tap. I believe that this frightening image offers a false picture.)

All this can end in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. If finally it is expressed, the anger often appears in exaggerated form, perhaps along with screaming or yelling, or in ineffective form, with simultaneous negations and apologies, or with various other untoward accompaniments. Such attempts can then be dismissed with a label such as "hysterical" and thereby discounted. Bernardez (1976, 1978) and Lerner (1977) have given clear clinical illustrations of these points. I'm sure many of us can add more.

Probably the most common occurrence, however, is that the anger is not conveyed at all. Instead, it is expressed, in the end, via the only remaining route—"symptoms," psychic or somatic, the most common of which is depression. This, I believe, was the case with Anita.

All of the issues I have discussed so far relate to another basic concept: The profound cultural fear of women's anger is probably connected to the fact that

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women have been the main “caretakers”—indeed, almost the only ones anybody can hope to have in this society. We have a culture which is not organized so that members of the dominant group really take care of each other. Men do not guarantee each other a bedrock assurance that they will look after each other no matter what, nor do they affirm that their development will be attended to with sensitivity and care. In fact, we have a culture in which men convince each other of quite the opposite. In this cultural context, the one person who everyone believes should be there to do the caring, tending, and nurturing is a woman. Not only does everyone want to believe that women will do this, everyone wants to believe that women *want* to do it and want to do it more than anything else. It has been written often that this is the way women find the fulfillment of their ultimate motivations—their instinctive, hence biological, drives that are said to be deeper than anything else. (Thus, if we are “letting them do that,” how can they possibly have any rightful cause for anger?)

I believe that women do develop valuable psychological characteristics because they participate in and foster the development of other people (a description that is probably more accurate than “caretaking”). But again, this point would require a long digression.

As so far conceived, the image of the person who wants to provide total and always-present care has been made *incompatible* with a person who can experience the emotion of anger, except as pathological. It appears as if we have been unable to conceive of a person who has the need for and the right to anger, and who simultaneously could truly attend to and care for others. (It is amazing how directly this notion has been carried over into psychological theory.) Simplistic as it may sound, I think we have all been encouraged to believe in such a figure. Perhaps it has seemed important to keep such an image alive in a culture which does not include care of its people as an inherent part of its own workings. Perhaps there could not exist the ruthless economy of our “outside world” if we did not maintain the vision of the unreal Madonna waiting for us in the “inside world”—that is, in inner psychological life. As an example, recent women writers have pointed to the amazing persistence or repeated reemergence of the figure of the Virgin Mary in the history of European civilization. She has no real power; she can intercede and plead for us, and she can comfort and care—and she is never angry.

To sum up this section, then, I’ve suggested that women have lived in the situation of being subor-

dinate, a situation that continually generates anger; simultaneously, women have been told that to be angry is destructive to women’s psychological being and sense of identity. Further, anger is seen as threatening to women’s life work, for women have concentrated on upholding, maintaining, supporting, and enhancing other people’s development, as well as relationships between people—which is, of course, the place in which *all* development occurs.

In the face of this situation, there is only one way women’s anger could go: into indirection and confusion. This path has had disastrous consequences for women themselves on the psychological level. But the situation has been part of (or more accurately, probably has been derived from) a larger societal history which has protected the dominant group from confronting its failure to incorporate care of its own members as a necessary, inherent part of the group’s culture. In other words, the notion is perpetuated, for the dominant group, that care and provision for the development of all people does not have to be built into the system. It can be left to an “underclass.” Members of the dominant group, then, do not have to feel the necessity to develop, as a *primary part of their personhood*, the conviction that they are, in a profound and real sense, responsible for each other. Indeed, they are forcefully *deterred* from developing such a sense of their identity, because it belongs to women. It is “feminine”—something men and a male culture should not want to be.

Meanwhile, the only human expression of anger which has had legitimacy has come from its manifestations in members of just one sex—men. This experience has formed the conception of anger which we all carry with us. Anger, as we have known it so far, may have taken on a particular shape just because it has existed within a context which allowed it to one sex only, and, most importantly, to a sex which has not been engaged in the requirement to care for its own members.

In addition, men have had to live as members of a group engaged in upholding a structure of dominance, whether any individual chose that or not. It would seem that in order to maintain a structure of dominance, half of the species has been encouraged to take on certain “unnatural,” or at least, not inevitable, characteristics, and to deprive itself the development of certain others. So, for example, to maintain dominance, any group would tend to fear and deny, and, therefore, would not really put into practice daily its potential for such abilities as perceiving and “feeling with” the other person, sometimes called “empathy,” or for having a belief in and a great desire for the

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flourishing of the other person's resources and abilities. Thus, one sex has not been encouraged to engage in the activities which make for the growth and enhancement of other human beings simultaneously with one's self, or even to engage in the direct daily sustenance and care of sheer physical life. I believe that all of these potential, but as yet little-practiced, forms of activity actually *do* alter the way in which anger is experienced and made manifest. They create a different configuration and integration of all emotions, particularly in the inner construction about the nature of another person and one's relationship to her or him. To put it more concretely, the actual practice of life-enhancing rather than life-restricting activities makes a crucial difference in our inner mental constructions about what we can count on the other person to do with us—and *to us*.

### Men and anger

I'd like now to talk briefly about the effects of growing up as a member of a dominant group, mentioning only *some* of the influences on the boy in the family, as the family has been constructed traditionally with the father as the head. But again, we must consider the larger context. Many scholars propose that the subordination of women was linked historically with the development of hierarchies of authority and power among males in society. That is, when men began to "own" women and children, men themselves had to be kept in their ordered places. Our culture has developed within a tradition, whatever its origin, in which men have been ordered in hierarchies. These dominant-subordinate relationships among men have been based on class, race, religion, or other factors. Therefore, the majority of men have lived in positions of subordination to other men. Whatever rightful anger men have had in response to that subordination has had to be suppressed, just as it has for all subordinate groups. Thus, men too, in their situations as subordinates, have not been allowed to express anger at the source and at the time and place when it may well be "appropriate" and could be appropriately handled.

Perhaps a preliminary definition of appropriate anger may be attempted here. Anger may be an emotion that can be expressed in nonverbal and verbal ways. At its simplest, it tells us that something is wrong—something hurts—and needs changing. Thus, anger provides a powerful (and useful) recognition of discomfort and motivation for action to bring about a change in immediate conditions. It is a statement to one's self and to others. If it can be recognized and expressed, it has done its work, and, most importantly,

others can respond. When I show my anger, you can know that something hurts me. There is a chance for back-and-forth action and reaction that leads to changing something between us, moving from what hurts to something better. If this possibility exists, the anger usually will dissipate. No one need be damaged. Problems begin and then become infinitely complex when anger is not allowed expression or even recognition at its source, in the immediate interaction.

In general, the societal hierarchical ranking of men has precluded the expression of anger in such a useful, productive interactional mode. This same hierarchical patterning and the same preclusion of the interactional expression of anger is then replicated in the family structure. Here, of course, it affects the most intimate relationships between fathers and sons. In regard to men's psychological development, there is a good deal of evidence that the young boy, following the pattern of the larger society, is not permitted to express his anger directly and immediately, especially to the father, the historic "head" of the family. At the same time, however, the boy is stimulated and encouraged to be "aggressive" —that is, to act aggressively. Boys are made to fear *not being aggressive*, lest they be found wanting, be beaten out by another, or (worst of all) be like a girl. All of these constitute terrible threats to a core part of what is *made to be* men's sense of identity—which has been called *masculinity*. And here we see how those simplistic divisions have come around to force men to define themselves *against* the definition of women, which is a falsity in the first place.

There is evidence that fathers, particularly, encourage boys' aggressive *action* (Block, 1978). Beyond that, however, some recent research suggests that fathers tend repeatedly to stimulate boys from the ages of one-and-a-half to two years, or even younger, to anger and aggression and then do not tolerate the direct expression of anger back at its source, to the father himself. For example, Gleason found that upper middle-class fathers, who think consciously that they love their sons, frequently sparred with the boys and called them names that are really "put-downs," such as "little dumbo," or "peanut head," and the like (1975). But the men stopped "playing" and even punished the boys when they became angry and expressed their anger to the fathers *themselves*. The observers in these studies were shocked at the amount of hostility conveyed and the amount of anger provoked in the children. These observations confirm stories I have heard many times in clinical work.

There are complex ramifications of these points. Only one will be suggested here. It relates to the



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earlier point that men, in general, have not participated in daily, close emotional interaction in children's lives and development, nor have they practiced this emotional interchange daily in relationships with adults of either sex. Consequently, many fathers have not built a base of exchange of many emotions with their sons (or daughters). This is important because at the time the boy's anger occurs, he usually experiences not only anger but usually some combination of feelings—including hurt, humiliation, vulnerability, impotence, and especially the feeling of isolation—being alone. But he is not encouraged to express these many feelings to his father, or indeed even to recognize them, to feel them for what they are. Instead, he is encouraged to translate them into action—aggressive action. Moreover, this aggressive action is not allowed to be directed to its source, the father. In general, even the young boy should not sustain and know a range of emotions for a short or long interval and then express them as directly as possible as emotions. Instead he is strongly encouraged to *act*—and act aggressively. This situation constitutes a powerful force beginning early in life and deflecting men from their *own* crucial experience. Here, it is men who are told that certain feelings are threatening to their identity and place in the world—all of this ending in various forms of denial of large pieces of reality. Incidentally, as women have begun to express their own perceptions in recent years, many women have observed that men don't seem able to talk about large portions of experience; they don't even have a conception of what the women are trying to talk about with them.

This, too, is very familiar clinically. And it is particularly common to find men acting most aggressively when they feel vulnerable, hurt, frightened, and alone.

This did seem to be the case with Anita's husband. When Anita began to voice even mild comments or questioning of him, he reacted with tyrannical anger and contempt, although he appeared on the surface to be a liberal, enlightened person. Anita now said that she had "sensed" this all along, although she couldn't have put it into clear formulations. I believe her husband felt, very basically, frightened of feeling alone and unsupported by Anita.

I'm suggesting, then, that the boys' anger cannot be of the quality that merely states something like, "You have hurt me, and I want to tell you how hurt, humiliated, and frightened that makes me." Such a statement has to rest on a basic assumption of safety—plus a belief that the other person will be *there* psychologically, will receive the message, and will respond in ongoing interaction. Instead, the boy has to feel some-

thing like, "I'm angry at you and I must better you, so that there is no risk that you can hurt me again."

It is impossible, for obvious reasons, to act on that feeling to a father, so the boy is encouraged to direct such action toward others—his colleagues and peers. (It is interesting to note the whole theory of the Oedipal complex and what an extraordinarily destructive scene it proposes. For those who follow traditional psychoanalytic theory, it is at this Oedipal period that the boy is definitively inducted into his culture and develops his morality. Some current developments in the theory propose that at this Oedipal stage the whole cultural symbolic system is incorporated—the language and thought that constitute the total way of being and thinking in the culture.)

For present purposes, I would stress only that a boy is led to deflect his anger from its immediate object, the father, who needn't be treating the boy that way in the first place. Further, in order to allow their sons (and daughters) to express anger usefully, fathers first would have to build a base of interchange involving many varied emotions. Also, such a base would permit the fathers to become aware of their own unnecessary and exaggerated stimulation of the boys' anger and aggression.

It is said that as they go on from this early stage, boys "develop," because they learn to use and channel their aggression, which I would call their deflected anger. They learn in organized games. The games and their later counterparts (or perhaps their historical origins), such as the military, train men to operate in the *games* of business, politics, and power, and thus to run the world. The key factor is said to be that boys learn to play by the rules (Gilligan, 1982). Indeed, some current writers propose that women's troubles in the world stem from the fact that we don't know how to play by these rules.

But what does learning to play by the rules mean? Some very interesting material now is emerging from scientific investigations of such games (Gilligan, 1982; Luria, 1981). To focus on only one part of it, Gilligan points out that one learns that it's the *game* that counts, not the people or the personal relationships among them (Gilligan, 1982). Trying to beat the other, hitting as hard as you can, and the like, doesn't mean you are hurting anyone personally; you are just playing the game. Likewise, the recipient should not take it personally; it doesn't really hurt. But as far as I can see, it does. Clinical work with men reveals that it hurts in many ways.

As the game is carried over into adult life, it allows men to compete, win, drive out the opposition, even totally destroy them. The game is played with

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the pretense that no one really is hurt. The same mentality can be—and has been—applied to war.

In the course of these situations, it is not only anger that boys and men feel; there are many emotions, but few can be known or expressed for what they are. A recent novel, *The House of God*, portrays such experiences at one stage in life, that of young adulthood (Shem, 1978). The story of an intern at a prestigious teaching hospital, it illustrates how many emotions—fear, horror, sadness, isolation, and especially pain and hurt—are turned into aggressive actions, even sadism, and into depersonalized sex with the nurses.

In such a life course, the participants are taught an amazing denial of reality. Each person learns he must deny his experience and attempt to act aggressively. If he can do that successfully, he can outdo the other—that is, he can win—a situation, which in the end, occurs rarely for most men.

If there were time, there are many additional points which should be made. For example, there are class and ethnic differences in the style of aggressive action, with middle class premiums on less obvious physical aggression and more controlled manipulations to gain status and power.

Also, I have not covered many of the major points about female and male development, especially the interrelationship of anger and sexuality. One major point, however, should be re-emphasized, even briefly: Many men report the feeling that their fathers abandoned them emotionally, and sometimes literally. They feel that their fathers were not emotionally “there,” ensuring that they could go through a variety of emotions with the *respect* or even with the psychological *presence* of their fathers.

### **Delineation of anger**

The suggestion here, then, is that our cultural tradition has distorted men’s experience and knowledge of anger and precluded its integration within a wide range of complex emotions. We have come to know anger as an aggressive, isolating, and destructive experience. Yet anger *does not have to be that*.

Here I would like to make a connection with what may be one of *the* most destructive psychological phenomena. This phenomenon is at the base of much past psychodynamic thought, and many women writers recently have underscored its importance. It is the suffering of an experience, but then not having the “permission” to truly suffer it—that is, not being able to go genuinely through the experience, know it, name it, and react with the emotions that it evokes. Such an experience is inevitably a social encounter; it occurs in

interaction with other people. The trouble comes when powerful people surrounding you say that you cannot react that way and, more importantly, that *you do not have* the emotions and the perceptions that you, in fact, have.

It is this situation which can create profound psychological trouble. Not only do you suffer deprivation or attack, *per se*, but you suffer the experience of complex emotions and the simultaneous “disconfirmation” of them—often followed by punishment for any attempt to express the feelings directly. Such experiences make it almost impossible even to know what you are experiencing. This is terrible and confusing for adults. It is even more so for children.

Several theorists—for example, Sullivan and Bion—have spoken about this in the past, using their own sets of terminology. I am adding the suggestion that there is a context in our culture which makes certain key experiences and emotions likely to be systematically and repeatedly disconfirmed, but in different ways for people of each sex.

I submit, therefore, that our problems with anger are due to insufficient *real* experience of anger and insufficient allowance for its direct expression at the time and in the ways in which it could be appropriate—when it need not have the connotations of harm, abuse, or violence. For men, the deflection of anger along with the simultaneous repeated restimulation of aggressive action is the problem. For women, the problem is a situation of subordination, which continually produces anger, along with the culture’s intolerance of women’s direct expression of anger in any form.

### **Psychological theories**

I would like to end by offering some questions about traditional psychological models of anger, and of all emotions. Psychoanalysts, for example, and some others, speak of “infantile” rage as the worst kind of anger, assuming a linear model which links earliest with “worst.” On the contrary, I think that you have to have lived a little to experience the worst kind of anger. You have to have experienced the kind of hurtful and simultaneously disavowed experience that I’ve tried to describe in order to acquire the kind of anger that has the connotations we usually associate with the most terrible and terrifying rage. Usually we call this “helpless rage.”

By comparison to this terrible experience, an infant’s rage probably is a different phenomenon. Infants and children do demonstrate something we label anger, and it may be vociferous. I believe, however, that it is a much more straightforward,

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readily-dissipated emotion—until it becomes complicated by the kind of experiences I've described. Unfortunately, within our cultural conditions, straightforward anger is very *likely to be complicated by such experiences*.

Following Freud's later formulations, the traditional psychoanalytic model has taught that people are born with something called aggression, with the suggestion of either a quantitative store of it or an inherent propensity toward it. This aggression is talked of as if it occurs in an almost "raw" state, without content. Through socialization, then, it is said to be "neutralized," "sublimated," "controlled," "modified," or the like.

It is possible instead that emotions as we have classified them so far are "developed" phenomena. They are "crafted" according to what the environmental—that is, the social—context evokes. They are then named, delineated, and conceptualized by that environment—that culture. In other words, infants have the ability to react strongly in a variety of ways, and something like "anger" is one of them. But this expressive reactivity is *not* the same as the kind of rage that can be culturally produced and then projected into the mind of the infant by adult theorists.

As Schafer has put it,

By devising and allocating words, which are names, people create modes of experience and enforce specific subjective experience. Names render events, situations, and relationships available or unavailable for psychological life . . . Consequently, whether or not something will be an instance of . . . activity or passivity, aggression or masochism . . . or something else altogether, or nothing at all, will depend on whether or not we consistently call it this or that or consistently do not name it at all, hence do not constitute and authorize its being . . . There are no preconceptual facts to be discovered and arrayed. There are only loose conventions governing the uses and groupings of the words . . . And these conventions, like all others, must manifest values. (1974)

In short, my notion is that the kind of anger which we traditionally have postulated as most extreme is *not there* originally. Our environment has created it and shaped it into the form we know. Such anger then is not intrinsic or inevitable. The anger we know is developed by a cultural structure which first incites an angry response. It then compounds the

problem by not allowing individuals to fully acknowledge and know that response, or to act on their experience. There is no context of assurance that we will be respected or well cared for if we make a direct, honest expression.

Because we—women and men—cannot experience anger as adults, we cannot yet allow it to our children. We have neither the emotional practice nor the concepts which would allow us to do so easily and without fear.

I do not intend to minimize the problem of anger. Instead, I am suggesting that it may be very difficult to entertain the proposition that we have a cultural structure which produces anger as we have known it so far. This cultural structure then ascribes anger to an inherent, dangerous drive—ultimately making us all afraid of ourselves and unable to use our anger to work for a better structure. All the while, the culture actively encourages members of the dominant group to use their anger against each other and against subordinates.

I do believe that our culture, and perhaps some others, will not be able to solve its problems with anger until we encourage each sex to examine and understand its own experience more fully and truthfully. I believe that, so far, neither sex has been able to experience, or to express, a sort of anger that may well be possible but which we are not yet able to perceive or conceptualize.

To end this discussion, I shall return to Anita's situation. She had been led to believe that her life's value should be conferred by her husband, and he was not conferring much. That was a reason to be angry. Further, when she tried to act more independently in a straightforward way, he punished her for it. That was a reason to be angry. She had worked for years to try to provide total care for her husband, and she wanted someone—not to take care of her, but—to care *about* her and her thoughts and feelings. No one cared about her in that way. That was another reason to be angry—and that is not dependency. In the face of these factors, plus other matters too lengthy to describe, she had problems in finding a valued sense of self. And that is not dependency either, but it is another reason to be angry. Anita had to struggle to understand her quest for self-worth, to transfer her anger into productive paths, and to deal with her various disappointments. However, she could shift to activities which brought her at least greater possibility of a better basis for self-worth.

A central point is that a revised examination of the origins and development of Anita's anger enables a clinician to begin with a different perspective. Her

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anger can be seen as a potential source of mobilization for action—a valuable potential—but with many obstacles to confront in the realities both within and outside her family, and within the constructions of her own mind.

If one can truly come to *feel* this way, I think it makes a critical difference. I think that this is very different from seeing her—even with the best of “sympathy”—as an angry, infantile, dependent woman.

I submit also that a truly respectful interchange based on the experiences of both sexes—especially when these are combined with the study of other oppressed people—can lead us along a path of enlarging dialog. And I believe that such a dialog is the only path to further understanding of the realities of psychological development, and—in this time of nuclear threat—even to the survival of us all.

## Discussion Summary

*After each colloquium lecture, a discussion session is held so that students and visitors can exchange ideas with each other and with the speaker. Questions, responses, and highlights of the discussion are selected, summarized, edited, and presented here to expand and clarify the speaker’s ideas. In this session Drs. Alexandra Kaplan and Janet Surrey of the Stone Center joined Miller in leading the discussion.*

**Comment:** I want to confirm from my own experience what you are saying about men not being able to allow women’s anger, and also about angry feelings which you can’t act on leading to violent feelings. For about two years I was harassed repeatedly by a certain man. At first I was annoyed; later I grew furious. When I told my male friends and coworkers and minister about the situation, they all played it down. They essentially said I couldn’t do anything to stop it. I don’t think they took my feelings seriously. They just couldn’t deal with how angry I was.

My women friends knew what I was talking about, though—they *really* knew. They understood how angry I was, and they helped me to know that my reactions made sense. It was *so important* to me—and I think it is important for all of us—to have that kind of confirmation. And it is often only women who can give it, because men are still so afraid of women’s emotions.

Women can help other women with anger that arises from harassment, for most women at least know the experience of walking down the street and having a man make comments. We are supposed to look straight ahead and not respond, but there’s a burning anger underneath. And the women who have been sexually harassed at work know it’s infuriating, and

they also know that many of the men bosses dismiss the whole issue. Too many men won’t even acknowledge that sexual teasing violates a woman, even without physical assault, and they certainly can’t handle the woman’s fury.

**Comment:** Men on their jobs get angry too, but the outcome is different. Sometimes a boss pulls some incredible act and men must endure it and say, “Yes sir, yes sir . . .” But I think that the men can acknowledge that. A lot of men will confirm that bosses make you angry, and you can’t speak up; but people can’t even see many of the reasons why women should be angry—as in the example we just heard.

**Question:** How do you feel about assertiveness training? It is very popular, particularly for women. But doesn’t it just encourage women to imitate men? It gives a formula for behavior, for women or men, that sets aside the gut-level experience of anger. In other words, you are told how you are supposed to react, but you don’t necessarily let yourself really experience anger, understand why it occurred, or draw on the experience to construct a new (maybe a “womanly”) approach to the topic.

**Kaplan:** In all honesty I have always been uncomfortable with assertiveness training, but the reason has never been clear until now. When you asked the question and I thought of it in terms of tonight’s lecture, the thought finally dawned on me: Assertiveness training gives an action mode—a formula for what to do—not necessarily based on a real understanding of one’s inner experience. Instead, what women might really need is anger awareness and the capacity to express anger to the other person at the time it occurs. Otherwise, it builds up over time and repeated incidents, resulting in more preoccupation with the angry feelings than with movement toward action to dispel the anger.

**Miller:** Too often what happens is that angry expressions get more exaggerated in our minds than they have to be. Most of the time women could be much more assertive without experiencing severe retaliation. We restrict ourselves more than is necessary when we really need to recognize our anger and practice responses that come out of our real feelings. Frankly, some of us suffer from sheer lack of practice as well as from the underlying reasons for the lack of practice.

**Kaplan:** A recent review of literature points out that the case is not so much that women are not assertive, but their assertiveness is not supported.

**Comment:** Let’s face it: Women’s position is dramatically lower than that of men. It’s nothing but fantasy if women think a new assertive style will

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really begin to turn things around. Assertive techniques won't solve the structural inequities or change women's economic position. Furthermore, considering how men run the world and act so destructively, no amount of assertiveness training is going to prevent a nuclear holocaust.

**Surrey:** Perhaps your idea even adds a new complication: When women use all the prescribed assertive techniques, and their basic position doesn't change, they may feel bad for not being able to be assertive enough. So, again, we women are led to blame ourselves when there are more powerful forces at work.

**Comment:** A recent article by Carol Tavris in *Psychology Today* ["Anger Defused," November, 1982] seems to say that acting angry doesn't necessarily help—that explosive anger only leads to more anger. While men are encouraged to act on their anger, I don't think they do any better than women in really understanding their own feelings.

**Surrey:** Sometimes a violent explosion is only more hurtful to the person who is angry, yet there exists a mythology about the dissipation of rage. In the 1960s and 1970s many people talked about depression being anger turned inward, and said that it was important for people to get their anger out in some way. This notion was the basis of encounter movements that encouraged releasing rage, suggesting it would leave the person in a positive state. The Tavris article, in contrast, suggests that an explosive outburst is not physically healthy for the individual, at least in terms of measured stress level. I think the article supports what Dr. Miller is talking about—that is, anger is a common experience; the real issue is whether one feels entitled to express it, or how much practice one has had at recognizing and communicating it. If one hasn't had practice handling anger, it may start coming out in explosive, confused, or ineffective ways. The article points out that some studies indicate that explosive outbursts don't defuse, but actually intensify, certain physiological measures such as blood pressure and heart rate.

**Comment:** I am doing some research on ambivalence, and, although I haven't completed the data analysis, I am intrigued by the sex differences I have observed in children. I have talked with kids about what happens when you are mad at someone you love—for example, being mad at your puppy. Real young children don't seem to understand ambivalence; they tend to say if they are mad at a puppy, they would just give it away. But by age seven or eight, the kids can identify and discuss angry actions toward a puppy whom they love. When they review pictures of

someone acting angrily toward a puppy, we ask how they know the person still loves the puppy. Boys typically reply with something like, "He didn't beat the puppy to death." In other words, the angry person could have been angrier and could have done real damage to the puppy; because that wasn't done, the person loves the puppy. The girls, in contrast, are more apt to say things like, "She remembers how nice the puppy was and how much fun they had the day before." They give explanations rooted in the *relationship*, not the action. I think anger accents different personality traits in just thinking or talking about it—with a focus on action being the common "male" characteristic and a more reflective, introspective style being "female." In fact, I think women generally have trouble even imagining explosive action possibilities.

**Question:** Can you envision and prescribe an imaginative plan to help us experience and express anger constructively?

**Miller:** I don't have a precise plan in mind, but I do have a vision of people just reacting straightforwardly when something hurts, or is bad, or is wrong. The reaction would be emotional and could be made without fear or hurting anybody. The problem now is that most of us have a lot of trouble giving an honest, straightforward reaction when we're angry, and we also have trouble accepting it when someone else tries. We tend to get embroiled in complicated, indirect messages and actions that leave both parties feeling bad. I'd prefer a scenario where, instead, the angry person could let another know her or his feelings without embarrassment or hesitation, then the other person could react directly, conveying real feelings. Some of us might consider the interaction to be impolite or rude or "not nice." I say fine, let's get on with it—get even the impulsive or "unreasonable" notions out, understand them in this light, be honest, and hear each other. I believe it would be ever so much better than no expression—or vague, indirect expression—with a resulting gradual, corrosive buildup of angry feelings that eventually can lead to intense explosions, including violence. Now this notion would not work for all situations—for example, in situations of real structural inequality which gives some people real power over others. But for many of the ordinary, day-to-day conflicts we face I think it would be a great relief. Parents who allowed such honest expression among their kids could view intense interactions as normal and appropriate instead of getting upset over "bad" behavior and wondering what they did to make the situation go wrong.

**Question:** Dr. Miller, you said that women live in a state of dependency and that inevitably generates

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anger. Yet, it seems to me that men are dependent on women, but the whole situation is rigged to look as if men don't have to be dependent on women at all. In my experience every time a man actually realizes he is dependent on a woman, it generates absolute rage and furious actions against the woman. What do you think?

**Miller:** I agree. Men generally can go for a long time—and the culture goes along with them—denying that they are dependent on women. The props are there, but no one admits to them. Being forced to admit them makes men very frightened and angry.

**Surrey:** Many men don't realize that they are dependent until separation is threatened; then they get some hint of the dependency and feel the rage, but, again, they tend to be more able to feel the rage. We have seen this as one of the times that men act most violently.

**Comment:** The whole structure of society, particularly the workplace, is such that the direct expression of anger is not tolerated and is even punished—particularly angry expressions by women. Unless we really bring about some basic changes in society, a psychological examination of anger (like tonight's session) may be interesting, but it isn't going to make anything better.

**Miller:** I agree with your description of the way things are. I do think there can be change, but I don't think it will be easy. An individual may find it impossible to make a dent in rigid structures that won't tolerate expressions of anger, but I think that groups of people can devise ways to make changes. We have to keep trying.

**Question:** In the light of the negative attitudes you expressed about organized games for boys, what do you think about the trend toward organized sports for women?

**Miller:** I'm really not against sports or physical activity for women, or even organized games. My argument is with the competitive, insensitive basis on which they traditionally have been organized and conducted. I am troubled with the notion that youngsters compete to win, and that they are taught that only the game counts, leaving out any recognition of, or attention to, how people feel. I wouldn't advocate that girls and women imitate that principle. I am absolutely convinced, however, that it is extremely important for girls and women to use their bodies to full capacity and to develop physical strength and power.

**Question:** How can women begin to express or dissipate their anger when it so clearly is not allowed? Look at our social situations—in our families, in the

general society—how is it possible?

**Miller:** I think that one starting point is at least to talk about it with other people. It helps to tease out the confusions we all have. For example: Am I angry? Am I not angry? What am I really angry about in this scene? Is it wrong? If it's wrong, how could I possibly be angry? It helps to talk those things out with others. Then certainly there are times when one just has to take the risk and express anger. It's not easy, and one must make judgments, for there are consequences. It would be irresponsible to advocate saying just what you think every time you get angry in some of our institutions. But there are times and places that aren't really fraught with as much danger as we imagine, and we can take the risks and be direct. Most people aren't going to be prepared to deal with our anger, so we can't expect the consequences to be comfortable or graceful. That's part of the risk.

**Surrey:** It is important for women to practice with each other and encourage each other when angry feelings arise.

**Question:** I'm feeling a sense of futility about all this. Given the way things are for most women, they could be angry from the moment they get up in the morning until they go to bed. Frankly, that makes me feel angry right now. What solace do you offer?

**Miller:** There *is* reason to be angry over and over again about many things. The problem gets even worse in that many women who feel anger immediately begin to think, "Something is wrong with me," or, "I am bad because I feel this way." I remember an illustrative story: I was talking with a few people about women's situation in society, and as we were about to walk out of a building, one of the women commented, "Oh, no, I don't see anything to be angry about." Outside the door, on the street just in front of us was a car bearing a bumper sticker that boldly displayed a crass put down of all women. The point was made—you don't have to go out of your way to get angry. This may not be much solace, but it may help us to know that our anger is often reasonable.

Another "hope" is the one that Dr. Surrey just mentioned. Even if we can't yet always express anger at the best time to the person involved, women can turn to each other in the ways Dr. Surrey mentioned. That is open to us. It is up to us to take that opportunity.

I believe that it is also important to keep trying to clarify thoughts and feelings. For example, we women can also hurt each other if we don't recognize that we can and probably will also get angry with each other at times, and that few of us know how to deal with that well—for good reasons.

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