Triggers for expressions of anger by men at work

Kathryn Moura

Griffith Business School

Griffith University, Nathan, Australia

Email: kathryn.moura@griffithuni.edu.au

Ashlea C Troth

Griffith Business School

Griffith University, Nathan, Australia

Email: A.Troth@griffith.edu.au

Peter J. Jordan

Griffith Business School

Griffith University, Nathan, Australia

Email: peter.jordan@griffith.edu.au
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ABSTRACT

While there is significant research regarding the impact of emotion at work there are few studies that examine anger in a work context. What is known is that men are more prone to expressions of anger at work than women. Given its links to greater employee frustration, stress and lower levels of performance understanding anger expressions of men at work is important. The aim of our research is to better understand anger triggers in the workplace. We present the preliminary data derived from interviews with 15 male respondents who had been referred to anger management intervention. Responses were coded and analysed using a grounded theory approach. Five main themes emerged for anger triggers. Practical implications of our research are discussed.

Keywords: emotions, interpersonal behaviour, perception, values, work performance.

Emotions research has received increasing attention in the last few years (Albrow 1992; Ashkanasy, Hartel & Zerbe 2000; Ashkanasy, Zerbe, & Hartel 2002; Brief & Weiss 2002; Fineman 2000; Goleman 1998; Lord, Klimoski, & Kanfer 2002; Payne & Cooper 2001). Emotions researchers have examined discrete emotions such as happiness (Gavin & Mason 2004), love (Foley & Powell 1999) and grief (Bento 1994) and their impact on the work environment. One discrete emotion that has not received a significant amount of attention is anger. Nevertheless, a small body of emerging research has examined the consequences of anger in the workplace (Fitness 2000), its links to workplace aggression (Glomb 2002), the impact of anger on other workers (Sloan 2004), as well as the gender differences in anger expression in the workplace (Domagalski & Steelman 2007). Given its links to greater employee frustration and stress and lower levels of performance (Fitness 2000), understanding anger expressions of men at work is important. To explore this issue in detail, our aim for this study is to examine the anger triggers for men who are referred to anger management intervention by their organisations. Our rationale for focussing on this subgroup is that men express more anger at work (Spielberger, Reheiser & Sydeman 1995, Domagalski & Steelman 2007). Furthermore, this particular group of men clearly have the most problematic experiences of anger in the workplace as their expressions of anger at work have resulted in their organisations or themselves requesting an intervention to address this issue. Investigating the anger triggers for this group will provide a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. To enable this, we draw on a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967).
While a pure grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967) suggests that theory be built from the ground up with no preconceived understanding of the problem, a debate has emerged over whether the data should be forced or should emerge (Glaser 1992). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), researchers operate in a world where they are forming theories every day as a part of their day-to-day existence and every individual’s attempts at making sense of their experiences in the world. On this basis, Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that grounded theory needs to take some note of this phenomenon and use our understanding of the world to interpret the data we collect. This is the approach we will take in our study. On this basis, we now review the relevant literature in the area of anger to better understand the topic and to assist in the interpretation of our data collection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of emotions within organisations is now extremely broad and covers areas including the role of emotion in stress and burnout (Pines & Aronson 1989), in the promotion of personal interests (Pfeffer 1981), in grievance and the results of the accumulation of grievance within an organisational context (Fortando 1992), and emotion as part of the work role (Simon & Nath 2004). Perrone and Vickers (2004) assert that emotions play a significant role in organisational life. Individuals make use of a variety of ways to regulate emotions based on their personal tendencies, the organisational set up and their personal understanding of the norms within the organisation (Callister, Gray, Gibson & Schweitzer 2007). The display of emotion at work is often controlled by the organisation whether it is for business reasons, for instance in organisations that expect their employees to display happiness towards their customers (Hochschild 1983), or as a part of a professional culture, for example, organisational value statements that promote emotional control between employees in the form of showing others respect (Callister, Gray, Gibson & Schweitzer 2007). Emotions researchers have also examined discrete emotions such as happiness (Gavin & Mason 2004), love (Foley & Powell 1999) and grief (Bento 1994) and their impact on the work environment.
The study of anger in the workplace is interesting as anger can be used both to enhance and detract from organisational performance. Anger can enhance organisational performance by contributing towards goal achievement (Keltner & Gross 1999) motivating individuals to address issues of injustice and inequity in their institutions (Bies, Tripp & Kramer 1997); enabling full expression of ideas and emotions (Hall, Rosip, Smith, LeBeau, Horgan & Carter 2006); and the elimination of distractions while working, as issues are dealt with (Galinsky, Gruenfeld & Magee, 2003). Anger, however, can also have disadvantages for organisations including increasing feelings of hostility (Begley 1994) and blame (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies 2001); the promotion of harmful organizational climates (Aquino, Douglas, & Martinko 2004); interpersonal revenge (Bies & Tripp 1998); increased organizational incivility (Andersson & Pearson 1999); potential aggression and violence (Fox & Spector 1999).

Weiss, Suckow and Cropanzano (1999) conceptualise anger as an emotion that involves an appraisal of responsibility for wrongdoing by another person or entity and often includes the goal of correcting the perceived wrong. Depending on the context in which anger is expressed it may be seen as more or less appropriate (Shields 2005). There are also anger advantages and disadvantages across different levels within the organisation (individual/relationship/team/organisation). At the individual level, high power individuals (supervisors, managers, owners) can use anger without fear of future negative consequences. This allows them to engage anger to fully express ideas (Hall et al. 2006) and emotions, and to eliminate distractions while working (Galinsky, Gruenfeld & Magee 2003). At the relational and team level, anger is a significant facet of hierarchical dyadic relationships (Glomb & Hulin 1997) and a factor in group conflict (Allred 1999). Van Kleef & Côté (2007), in their dual process model for negotiation, propose that anger can be used to advantage a negotiator depending on the appropriateness of the opponent’s display of anger. According to Van Kleef & Côté (2007) low power negotiators tend to concede to an angry opponent even when his or her anger is inappropriate because of the potential costs to their course of action (e.g. dismissal). Clearly, anger has utility within organisations. At the organisational level, expressions of anger have long been considered imperative to motivating individuals to address issues of injustice and inequity in their institutions (Bies, Tripp &
Organisations that value anger have used it to accomplish goals (Callister, Gray, Schweitzer, Gibson, & Tang 2003).

On the other hand, uncontrolled anger has been considered predominantly a disruptive state to be regulated closely (Dilorio & Nusbaumer 1993; Wharton & Erickson 1993) and is rarely put to functional use. Glomb (2002) described anger as a disruptive emotion, which can lead to verbal aggression and hostility provoking aggression, disrupting relationships, output (Glomb & Hulin 1997; Williams & Alliger 1994) and interfering with negotiations (Allred, Mallozzi, Matsui, & Raia 1997). It has the potential to generate long term negative consequences (Ronka & Pulkkinen 1995). According to Booth & Mann (2005), it is vital that managers and leaders within organisations realise that dealing with anger at work includes addressing root causes within organisations instead of assuming that anger is an individual issue associated to one’s personality.

In conclusion, there has been very little work examining triggers for men’s anger in the workplace, and more specifically that of men referred to anger management intervention by their organisations. Clearly the potential for anger to have negative consequences when not controlled in organisations is an area which needs investigation. In light of this, the focus of our research is on male employees’ triggers to anger at work. Investigating their anger triggers may provide a deeper understanding of reasons behind anger in the workplace.

**METHOD**

**Procedure**

In this study, we conducted semi-structured individual interviews to elicit personal, open, direct and detailed stories from participants that are essential in building theory (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006). A total of 15 respondents participated in in-depth individual interviews of approximately 30 minutes in duration. Interviews were undertaken in a private, undisturbed training room in a neutral setting (i.e., away from the participant’s workplace) to ensure participants felt free to share their experiences and stories (Burns and Grove 2005). Interviews were conducted before any training, coaching or intervention took place.
To facilitate our Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1990) we developed an initial set of questions which were linked to a set of probing questions. Other questions emerged during the dialogue and these were explored to gain a deeper understanding of anger triggers at work (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006). The data were drawn from notes of the interviewer with no video or audio recording made of the interviews. The decision not to record the interviews was made due to the sensitive nature of the interview and the potential vulnerability of the sample (being referred for an anger management intervention). We were of the opinion that respondents would be more open if they were not being recorded. All participants were given the option at the beginning of the interview for their data not to be included in this research study. Consent forms were collected from all respondents.

After the interviewing process, the interviewer extended the interview notes with observations and clarified points within the transcript. Subsequently the interview transcripts were analysed for themes (Glaser & Straus 1967). During this process, constant comparison and reduction was used to develop clear and concise categories. The data were then subjected to analysis by a second coder to check for inter rater reliability.

Participants

We used a purposive (non probability) sampling technique to select men who were participating in a specific six week Anger Management Intervention Course. No age restriction was set. The participants were either referred by their organisation or self referred as a result of anger expressions that had become problematic at work. The ages of participants ranged from 27 to 59 years with a mean age of 41.5 years. Of the sample, 73.4% were referred by their organisations and 26.6% were self referred. The average experience of this group in their current role was 8.5 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Triggers to Anger

A total of five main themes emerged in relation to the interview question, “What do you think triggers your anger?”. In order of frequency, the five main themes are: workplace incompetence,
unmet expectations, being disregarded by others, concern for the bottom line and unfair treatment. These are described in more detail below:

Workplace incompetence was described by the study participants as individuals within an organisation who say they know what they are doing, but don’t; individuals who do not know the organisation’s policies and procedures; individuals who deflect you onto someone else who can ‘maybe’ deal with the problem; rule changing and discrepancy in what is advertised and what is actually provided. In essence this theme covers the respondent’s reactions to dealing with other people in the organisation that they consider to be incompetent. Direct quotes from participants related to this theme are: “When they change my program regularly, I get angry” (Participant 15); “I can’t stand fools, people who think they know what they’re talking about but they don’t” (Participant 9); “Sometimes personnel don’t know what the policy is.” (Participant 3); “If you can’t do your job, I’m not here to hold your hand.” (Participant 8); “I was available to work and they ring someone else. Why can’t someone do their job in the office?” (Participant 8). Weiss & Cropanzano (1996) explain that certain events in the workplace elicit specific emotions, which in turn cause spontaneous affect-directed behaviours. In this case, we are examining events (actions that lead to a perception of incompetence) that result in expressions of anger. Kruml & Geddes (2000) argue that individuals who fake their feelings are in danger of becoming emotionally exhausted, cynical towards customers and less psychologically attached to their jobs. It appears that the respondent’s expressions of anger to this trigger are a coping mechanism to relieve this type of stress. Clearly, within this theme a trigger to anger is the inability to control other employee’s level of performance at work.

Unmet expectations were described by study participants in terms of having high expectations of others, leading to anger when these expectations were not met. It was also described as when things don’t go my way. In dealing with the complexities of a workplace we all develop scripts for how processes should go within organisations and for how people should behave within organisations. This is a mechanism that is used to simplify interactions within these organisations. An example of this would be an employer’s expectation about the commitment of employees. Whereas one employer may expect only continuance commitment (minimal engagement) from their workers, others would expect affective commitment (emotional attachment to the job) from their employees (Allen and
Meyer, 1990). In each of these cases the expectations of the employer would vary dramatically with the employer expecting continuance commitment to be satisfied with workers not being absent, and the employer expecting employees to have affective commitment expecting extra effort from their employees with no additional compensation. Quotes from participants that support this theme include “I have expectations of my employees and if these aren’t met, that is an issue.” (Participant 5); “I expect employees to obey the rules immediately especially because of the danger of death within the industry. I certainly don’t want the death of a worker hanging over my head.” (Participant 5).

Ashkanasy (2002) highlights that affective states can influence an individual’s attitude and behaviour at work affecting their performance and how they deal with others. People can react to situations and feel angry or frustrated. Dispositions can contribute to the way in which events construct affective reactions and to affective oscillations over time (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996). Berkowitz and Harmon-Jones (2004) identify expectations as a possible cause of anger. When participant’s expectations were not met words such as ‘fools’, ‘stupid’, ‘idiots’, were used to describe those who did not measure up to participant’s expectations. Unmet expectations is clearly a trigger for anger.

The theme of Being disregarded by others was defined by participants as a lack of common courtesy in listening by others towards them and a lack of response when requests are made. Transcripts from participants that were used to develop this theme include: “After I speak to the person concerned, after the third time I have mentioned it to them it becomes an issue.” (Participant 14). “I keep issues to myself unless it gets to the point where I feel I am not being heard or ignored”(Participant 5); “I get angry when people don’t abide by common courtesy and ignore me, especially as I am the boss and responsible for making money and bringing in results” (Participant 5); “Not being listened to, when you try to make a point and they repeatedly ignore that point” (Participant 7); “If I am ignored or when people do not act on what I requested of them immediately, I get angry” (Participant 5). Based on these data, participants have considered that they spoke up for a reason and their ‘voice’ was disregarded, unheard or continually ignored, and anger was the outcome. Researchers argue anger is a powerful influence and high excitement is part of a syndrome of physiological, behavioural, and cognitive reactions that occur when people are emotionally aggravated (Berkowitz 2000). When participants are affected by not being listened to or ignored,
anger might be one of the ways in which they can get their point across and eventually be heard. While these may seem like simple interpersonal skills, listening is often identified as one of the most under appreciated skills employees can have in a workplace. The findings of this study support other research that found not listening as a significant trigger for anger (Carpenter & Halberstadt 1996).

*Concern for the bottom line* was mainly a concern for business owners, managers and CEO’s although a few employees who had been previously in management also had this concern. This was described by participants as a lack of organisational results, time wasting and loss of finance. A few direct quotes from participants are: “I get angry with people who don’t pull their weight around the place and don’t get the job done when it should be done.” (Participant 14); “I get angry when people don’t abide by common courtesy and ignore me, especially as I am the boss and responsible for making money and bringing in results.” (Participant 1); “If I perceive I am going to lose something, even if it is 20c, for example, I will argue with people.” (Participant 4). According to some of the participants in the study, if anyone or anything stands in the way of achieving results, there is a problem. Goal interference and blocking organisational results is a common source of anger (Chen & Spector 1992; Fox & Spector 1999). Differences exist between the reaction of participants who are owners, CEO’s and participants who are employees. Owners and CEO’s have less fear of expressing their anger, yet employees expressed a certain restraint in this expression for fear of dismissal or for fear of creating difficulties for themselves within the organisation. According to Hochschild (1983), often employees engage in acting, of a deep or surface nature, to prevent their anger from emerging. One of the potential consequences of employees using surface acting to constrain their anger is emotional dissonance. Emotional dissonance reduces wellbeing and can lead to burnout and other health factors (Glomb & Tews 2004; Salovey, Detweiler, Stevard & Bedell 2001; Schaufeli & Buunk 2003; Zapf 2002), which can have serious consequences for organisations. In this case respondents are reducing their potential for emotional dissonance by expressing their concerns and frustrations over this issue. The manner in which this is done (through expressions of anger), however, has potential for creating disharmony in the workplace.

*Unfair treatment* was described by participants as being belittled, taken advantage of, being tricked, insulted, being called stupid and being harmed by someone. Direct transcripts from
participant responses are: “I got seven letter commendations. That mustn’t matter and I’m not running a crew anymore.” (Participant 8); “I get angry when someone makes a mess where someone else is going to be working and leaves it up to me to clean up.” (Participant 7); “Feeling like I’m not being brought on board for big issues.” (Participant 10); “When I feel I’m being downtrodden, I get really angry. It spins me into a win/lose situation. I have to win no matter what.” (Participant 13); “I feel very upset for being the ‘dump’ for work that needs to be done.” (Participant 14). Perceptions of unjust treatment are associated with feelings of anger and hostility (Barclay, Sharliki & Pugh 2005). People tend to engage in hostile and retaliatory behaviour when they feel they are unfairly treated. In a study conducted by Booth and Mann (2005) unjust treatment was one of the main triggers for anger. In our study unfair treatment was still important to respondents, but not as the most frequently mentioned or most important trigger for participant’s anger. We suggest there are some reasons for this. First, Booth and Mann’s (2005) sample comprised both male and female participants, whereas in our study we only have male respondents. Second, Booth & Mann (2005) recruited more ‘typical’ employees in contrast to this study where employees were specifically referred to a program to assist with their anger management. We suggest these differences might provide a platform for future research in this area as to whether triggers vary in significance depending on gender.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has some limitations. First, we acknowledge the small sample. Although we are in the process of collecting additional interview data, we consider that the data we are reporting are close to theoretical saturation. Research suggests 20 interviews are typically adequate to elicit a full range of themes and we will expand our sample to this size in the future (Sandberg, 2000). The second limitation concerns the method of data collection during the interviews. To ensure maximum confidentiality for participants to respond to the interview questions, we decided not to audio record the interviews. This results in a limitation in that the accuracy of the note taking cannot be checked. Recorded interviews would have allowed for greater accuracy in data collection and enabled the interviewer to maintain good eye contact with participants. This contributes towards lower defence mechanisms during the interview (Strauss & Corbin 1990). As noted however we made a specific
decision not to record due to the sensitive position of the respondents. In future research, we will seek the permission to record the interview from a small number of participants to verify how accurate the notes are and whether this influenced the data collection. The final limitation is the potential for bias introduced by the interviewer. Research quality is closely dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and personal biases can pose a limitation to the research. Being aware of these biases is important and the interviewer reflected on potential biases following each interview to ensure the data were not tainted by bias. We also looked at the data being coded by a third party to make sure the interpretation of the data were accurate.

Nevertheless, a major strength of our study lies in its qualitative and interpretive nature. Data grounded in ‘real life’ scenarios bring a depth to the study and a degree of personal understanding that is sometimes missed in quantitative studies (Strauss & Corbin 1990). By enabling people to tell their own stories of anger in the workplace and focussing on a group for whom anger had become problematic, participants were able to provide details relating to internal and external triggers without the prompting that occurs in much organisational research. The nature of our sample is another strength of this study. While much anger research has focussed on general population samples (Fitness 2000), this research has focussed on a specific population for whom experiences of anger are particularly problematic. This is a very unique sample and provides a good insight into the problem.

In future research we can use the framework for understanding anger at work that we have developed in this study and test it on general populations of men and women in the workplace. This research would provide an understanding of the differentiation between the general experience of anger and anger that leads to a need for formal intervention.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Our findings have practical implications to human resource management and organisational behaviour professionals. The practical contribution of our research is a better understanding of the triggers that precipitate men’s anger in the workplace particularly male workers who respond to feelings of anger in inappropriate ways. Anger needs to be addressed at an organisational level, not only at the individual one. The results and discussion relating to this study provide useful information
to organisations on how they can minimise affective events within organisations that can possibly trigger anger, such as workplace incompetence, lack of resources on site, organisational inconsistencies in policy or discrepancies in what is promised by an organisation and what is actually delivered. It also provides a platform for organisations to refer employees to anger management intervention as research indicates these men do not have many skills to deal with anger. Employees will be offered an opportunity to learn how to manage their anger effectively gaining more self awareness as well as new tools and skills. Most employees referred to anger management do not have any idea of what to do differently in situations which trigger their anger.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have made use of several frameworks to better understand triggers that precipitate anger in the workplace and to explore some of the strategies for managing anger in the workplace. Specifically the frameworks we have drawn on are the Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano 1996); and the Emotional Labour (Hochschild 1983). Both these frameworks were useful in interpreting our data and we suggest that much more use can be made of these frameworks in future research in relation to anger at work. We have also considered the role anger plays in the workplace and identified a number of advantages and disadvantages for employees expressing anger at work. The bottom line here is that anger is not necessarily good or bad, but has a utility in organisations and the outcome depends on how appropriate the expression of anger is perceived by others. We found significant support for our findings from previous studies. Significantly however our research can be differentiated by virtue of the sample we have drawn on. While our research has confirmed that anger triggers exist, we specifically note that the type of triggers and the intensity with which they were experienced are most likely different. In conclusion our research has contributed some new insights to a field that is both organizationally important and of increasing interest to researchers.
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