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When Is Anger Helpful or Hurtful? Status and Role Impact on Anger Expression and Outcomes

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Abstract

Anger expressers and targets often experience anger as an unpleasant and potentially damaging emotion. However, emerging social functional perspectives on workplace anger suggest that anger expressions can promote valued dialogue, facilitating the airing of differences that can lead to improved working relationship and movement toward organizational goals and beneficial change. While supervisors typically express work-related anger with impunity, subordinate anger may be challenged and sanctioned more frequently. Hypotheses tested status (supervisor vs. subordinate) and role (expresser vs. target) effects on perceived outcomes. Findings indicate a significant main effect for status and significant interaction with role such that subordinates who are targets of supervisor anger, reported significantly more negative outcomes from anger expression than any other type of anger interaction. We also found that existing strong relationships between supervisors and subordinates contribute to outcomes that are more favorable following anger expressions at work.

Workplace anger expressions, ranging from mild frustration to slapstick tantrums to extreme violence, are regularly captured by dramatic and comedic portrayals in film and television. In contrast, real-life workplace anger is rarely newsworthy unless an employee commits a violent act (e.g., the terrorist murdering co-workers in San Bernardino or USPS workers "going postal") or another extreme outcome occurs, such as a CEO tirade that causes the stock price to plummet (Wong, 2001). Nonviolent and less dramatic anger expressions are, nevertheless, common among organizational members—both supervisors and subordinates. Despite this ubiquity of anger in the workplace, organizational participants often experience unique challenges and concerns communicating anger, with their status differences being a critical source of that challenge.

Strong emotions, such as anger, are thought to threaten relationships and degrade communication accuracy (Anderson & Guerrero, 1998; Rothman & Magee, 2016; Wubben, Cremer, & Dijk, 2009). Indeed, the status differences inherent in supervisor–subordinate relationships have been seen as breeding grounds of anger and even fear (Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000). In academic and practitioner literature, the negative effects of anger have been examined for their proposed harmful effects on status relationships (Allcorn, 1994; Callister, Gray, Gibson, Schweitzer, & Tan, 2014; Gibson & Callister, 2010). For instance, stress responses from anger expressions can trigger feelings of blame (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001)), the desire for revenge (Bies & Tripp, 2000), and increased incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Nevertheless, social functional and instrumental approaches to emotion and its regulation—a growing area of organizational study—highlight a range of ways that anger expressions can be beneficial to work

relationships. These benefits include airing of differences, initiating beneficial change, addressing injustice, improving working relationships, and facilitating movement toward individual and organizational goals (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Gibson, Schweitzer, Callister, & Gray, 2009; Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016; Stickney & Geddes, 2014; Tamir & Ford, 2012; Van Kleef & Côté, 2007).

The dual threshold model (DTM; Geddes & Callister, 2007) helps demonstrate the potential for favorable and unfavorable consequences from anger at work. The two thresholds reflect social norms regarding emotion expression and demarcate three forms of workplace anger: suppressed, expressed, and deviant. Specifically, the model proposes that negative outcomes are more likely with suppressed anger (i.e., fails to cross an expression threshold) and deviant anger (i.e., crosses both expression and impropriety thresholds). In contrast, expressed anger—anger that stays within the space between thresholds or the "zone of expressive tolerance" (Fineman, 2000)—can promote more positive outcomes. Key for our research is also the notion that "expressed anger" reflects communication with a relevant party who can address the problematic issue.

Extending DTM theory, in this study, we focus on subordinate and supervisors and examine each perspective for how they view the consequences of expressed workplace anger. A specific theoretical prescription from DTM was to challenge scholars in future research to examine how status affects anger expression outcomes (Geddes & Callister, 2007, p. 739). With organizational status inherent in their hierarchical positions, managers and supervisors are afforded "emotional privilege" (Averill, 1982; 1997) that allows them to express anger with minimal fear regarding organizational sanctions. Applying this notion to the DTM, supervisors have more "space" between thresholds to express anger without being labeled as, or sanctioned for, deviant, inappropriate anger expression. Subordinates, on the other hand, with lower status, do not share this same emotional privilege, have less space between thresholds, and are more likely to be sanctioned when expressing anger, especially to their boss. Consequently, we anticipate that status will impact how favorably organizational members tend to view expressed anger, with supervisors being most likely to see the good from their expressed anger. In other words, with emotional privilege (via status) comes a more positive perspective.

We further extend DTM theory by exploring the effects of being a target of another's expressed anger. Being the target (vs. the anger expresser) likely impacts how favorably one perceives the emotional encounter. Given supervisors' increased privilege and threshold space, supervisors are less likely to be negatively affected from subordinate anger than vice versa. Specifically, when expressing anger, supervisors can not only demand performance changes, they can also offer significantly negative consequences to their employee for noncompliance. This is unlikely with upward anger, as subordinates have no "right" to sanction their bosses. On the other hand, subordinate targets of supervisor anger simultaneously bear the negative experiences of receiving anger and suppressing tendencies to respond less favorably, suggesting a more negative experience. Consequently, we anticipate that one's organizational status and role (target or expresser) in an emotion episode will significantly impact how favorably or unfavorably organizational members view the outcomes of expressed anger at work.

In this article, we begin with a premise that in organizational life, reducing or eliminating anger is unlikely because of increasingly pressure-filled workplaces. However, we may be able to change our ways of *thinking* about and responding to anger. To explore these possibilities, we collected data from participants working in a variety of organizations, asking respondents to describe recent anger episodes and to delineate any positive and negative outcomes that occurred. By pursuing these data, we challenge prevalent expectations to determine whether anger episodes directed both upward (from subordinate to supervisor) and downward (from supervisor to subordinate) can be an important source of learning for both parties. While these expressions may at times be uncomfortable for both parties, and differences in status and roles may impact how favorably organizational members view anger encounters, we assert they can nevertheless promote the resolution of work problems and enhance working relationships.

Why Anger Is Viewed Negatively

Anger suffers from the widespread perspective that it promotes negative experiences, partly as a result of individuals' recall of their own salient episodes. Anger "stands out" in individuals' memory of events, and this salience can cause an availability bias (Litvak, Lerner, Tiedens, & Shonk, 2010). Events that involve anger leading to pain, embarrassment, and even aggressive actions in the workplace are more memorable than the far more common minor frustrations, passive behaviors, and interpersonal slights that tend to comprise anger expression at work. Indeed, expressed anger is rarely intended to harm others and often operates independently from aggression (Averill, 1982; Clore & Ortony, 1991). Drawing on a range of organizational and psychological research, Gibson and Callister (2010) define 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" (p. 68). Anger, then, consists of cognitive appraisals that lead to a desire for approach behavior to resolve the situation at hand. Aggression, in contrast, is an actual behavioral response undertaken to harm another person or thing (Spielberger, 1999). We focus here on feelings and expressions of anger, noting that the distinction between anger expression and aggression is critical to understand anger's potential value in the workplace (Geddes & Stickney, 2011).

Why Anger Can Be Viewed Positively

Anger is a socially-constructed emotion, meaning that many aspects of its feeling and expression are shaped by cultural and organizational norms rather than biological imperatives (Hareli, Rafaeli, & Parkinson, 2008). Similarly, perceived outcomes are also socially constructed. We determine whether or not the outcome of an anger episode is positive by the perceptions of the person who expressed the anger, as well as the target(s) of that anger—especially the degree to which they regard the anger as serving adaptive or beneficial purposes for the relationship, group, or organization (Geddes & Callister, 2007). Existing empirical work examining outcomes from anger expression finds that anger leads to positive outcomes about 40–60% of the time (Gibson et al., 2009; Kassinove, Sukhodolsky, Tsytsarev, & Solovyova, 1997). Research by Geddes and Stickney (2011; Stickney & Geddes, 2014, 2016) reports that those who expressed workplace anger to "relevant others" (either the cause of their angst or management) consistently saw problematic situations and working relationships improve.

What determines whether anger episodes lead to positive outcomes? The answer to this question is, not surprisingly, complicated and multifaceted. Proposed factors include intensity of the anger feeling and expression (Frijda, Ortony, Sonnemans, & Clore, 1992; Gibson et al., 2009), the anger expression target (Geddes & Callister, 2007), gender of the interactants (Domagalski & Steelman, 2007; Sloan, 2012), the nature of the parties' relationship (e.g., communal or exchange-oriented; Clark & Taraban, 1991), organizational commitment (Stickney & Geddes, 2014), and, importantly, the status of the interactants (Fitness, 2000; Sloan, 2004).

In this study, we examine status (supervisor or subordinate) and role (anger expresser or target) as key variables that influence outcomes from anger expression in organizations. While status and anger have received some research attention, findings remain inconclusive. We contend that part of this ambiguity stems from insufficient understanding of the relationship between status differences and anger regulation and expression. Consequently, we chose to reexamine status in relation to the role either participant played in the anger episode to explore how status and role interact and generate more or less favorable outcomes from these emotional encounters. In addition, we considered the nature of the relationship between parties an important moderating variable impacting the outcomes of anger expression between supervisors and their subordinates.

Status and Role Effects

Status is the "differentiation of prestige and deference among individuals" (Mayer & Buckley, 1970, p. 46). In organizations, status is most often associated with a position in the hierarchical structure, such that an individual with supervisory authority over others is said to have higher status relative to those being supervised (Domagalski & Steelman, 2007). Higher status is usually associated with greater authority, more autonomy (typically) from social position, control over rewards and punishments, and enhanced expertise or knowledge (Chi & Ho, 2014; Conway, Di Fazio, & Mayman, 1999). In this article, we refer to those higher in a status dyad as "supervisor" and those over whom they have authority as "subordinate." We understand that with the increasing use of flattened, team-based structures, these terms may find less common use in organizations. However, we argue that hierarchical status differences in organizations remain pervasive and are impactful, despite changing terminology.

Conventional views linking status and anger suggest supervisors have more degrees of freedom in their ability to express anger, and fewer sanctions for that expression than their subordinates, that is, emotional *privilege* (Averill, 1997; Geddes & Callister, 2007; Gibson & Schroeder, 2002). Anger by supervisors is seen as a functional goad to motivation and action, with an angry coach's half-time impassioned speech as a quintessential example. While these expressions may be viewed as, or escalate into bullying (Hershcovis, 2011; Jacobson, Hood, & Van Buren, 2014; Tepper & Henle, 2011), they are generally viewed as furthering organizational goals for productivity and performance, especially by those in charge (Lovaglia & Houser, 1996). Typically, sanctions for this behavior are sporadic and organization-specific. In contrast, low-status subordinates who feel strong anger in response to workplace situations tend to control or silence that anger, although this tendency can vary by gender and culture (Domagalski & Steelman, 2007; Fitness, 2000; Park et al., 2013). They also may vent their anger to sympathetic coworkers or family members as they seek social support (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Stickney & Geddes, 2014). If they do express anger upwards, they may perceive—and, in reality, may confront—a higher probability of negative sanctions (Geddes & Stickney, 2011; Sloan, 2012).

Empirical studies show that status differences lead to lower-status actors experiencing stronger anger than higher-status actors while being less likely to express it (Sloan, 2004; Stets & Tsushima, 2001). This is particularly problematic given Pennebaker's (1990) admonitions that detrimental outcomes are more likely when individuals want to address a problematic situation but feel they cannot disclose their feelings.

Workplace settings obviously are rife with complexity, and the status–anger relationship to outcomes is affected by numerous variables previously identified. Critical to the relationship, for example, are normative influences. Importantly, the general norm that allows higher-status members to express anger may be counteracted by organization-specific norms for supervisors in high-status positions to exercise self-control and emotional neutrality. In fact, self-control and regulation of emotions are considered critical aspects of emotional intelligence and being a "professional" supervisor (Ashkanasy, Zerbe, & Hartël, 2002; Lewis, 2000; Lindebaum, Jordan, & Morris, 2015). In a study of supervisorial participants, Domagalski and Steelman (2007) found that the most frequent method for handling anger by supervisors in the presence of a subordinate was anger *control* rather than expression. Thus, contradicting predictions of status research, supervisors did not express their anger in the presence of subordinates more frequently than subordinates in the presence of supervisors.

These findings suggest that status alone cannot predict how anger episodes are perceived and critiqued. In addition to examining hierarchical status, it is important to consider anger expression role (target or expresser) when exploring anger episodes and their outcomes at work. While supervisors are perceived to (or have the "right" to) primarily play the role of expresser in anger episodes, sometimes they are the target. Thus, both supervisors and subordinates can express and be the target of each other's anger. Research indicates that simply expressing anger brings perceptions of a degree of status and control in a relationship (Conway et al., 1999; Domagalski & Steelman, 2007; Gallois, 1994; Lovaglia &

Houser, 1996; Parlamis, Allred, & Block, 2010). Consequently, the role (expresser or target) organizational members play in anger episodes may contribute to whether or not they believe positive outcomes emerged from anger episodes.

The reinforcing aspect of status and role is confirmed by Tiedens (2001) who showed in settings ranging from perceptions of political leaders to co-workers to job candidates, that when relative status information is unavailable, individuals who express anger are seen as more competent and deserving of higher status. This also fits the prediction of affect control theory (Smith-Lovin, 1990) suggesting that expressing anger can indicate perceived status and be empowering for the expresser, providing a degree of emotional privilege (Conway et al., 1999). Conversely, being the target of anger can be an indication of lower status and control. Gender studies further hint that the role of expresser is often more beneficial for men than women (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Salerno & Peter-Hagene, 2015; Sloan, 2004). Gibson et al. (2009) also found that status of agent and target was not a predictor of whether anger expressions led to positive outcomes in a variety of organizational settings. Thus, focusing on status (i.e., supervisor or subordinate) and the role (i.e., target or expresser) one plays in anger episodes demonstrates the potential for dynamic supervisor–subordinate anger episodes at work.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Existing research raises questions regarding status and role effects on anger episodes in superior–subordinate relationships. How does status (supervisor or subordinate) and role (expresser or target) affect the relationship between anger and outcomes? In other words, are either of these stronger predictors of perceived positive or negative anger outcomes at work?

As noted earlier, we are interested in exploring how anger expressions can lead to potentially functional outcomes, in the sense of helping a supervisor and his or her subordinate work together to resolve organizational problems. We explore these dynamics in the hope of providing possible explanations for inconsistent result patterns within status and anger expression research (see overview in Gibson & Callister, 2010). Therefore, we offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Supervisors will report more positive anger outcomes than subordinates regardless of whether they are the target or expresser of anger.

Hypothesis 2: Expressing anger to either a supervisor or a subordinate will result in more positive perceptions of anger outcomes than being the target of anger.

In addition to main effects for both status and role on anger, we anticipate an interaction effect impacting our four groups of respondents: Subordinate anger targets and expressers and supervisor anger targets and expressers. Given status differentials, subordinate anger targets are likely more vulnerable to sanctions than the other groups and will experience more negative than positive responses including feeling misjudged, vulnerable, and/or angrier than subordinate anger expressers or either supervisor expressers or targets. Consequently, we anticipate a status–role interaction such that subordinate anger targets will report the lowest levels of positive outcomes from workplace anger episodes. In contrast, we expect supervisor anger expressers to produce the highest levels of positive outcomes of any of the four respondent groups. This is because supervisors tend to see immediate and beneficial employee performance changes following their anger expression. In addition, they are less likely to feel vulnerable or worried about the consequences from their expressions. As targets of anger, however, they may become defensive and angry, especially following anger expressed by their subordinates (see Figure 1). Therefore, we examine the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: There is an interaction effect for status and role such that subordinate anger targets will report the lowest level of positive outcomes following anger episodes.

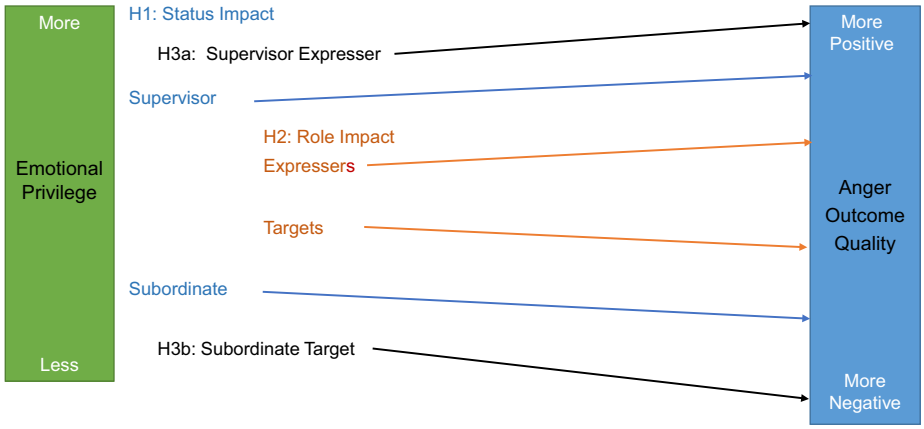

Figure 1. Hypotheses 1–3: Status and role impact on anger outcomes at work.

Hypothesis 3b: There is an interaction effect for status and role such that supervisor anger expressers will report the highest level of positive outcomes following anger expressions.

Beyond our status and role-specific research questions and hypotheses, we also anticipated that positive regard for one's employee or boss would make a difference when engaged in an emotionally-intense interaction at work. We recognize that strong, positive relationships between employees and their bosses likely will lead to responding more favorably and working more diligently to resolve conflicts and problematic situations identified in the expressed anger (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Without such a relationship, we expect parties will be less concerned and less likely to address the issues brought up during superior–subordinate exchanges. Ultimately, the relative emotional proximity (i.e., closeness and loyalty) one feels toward their subordinate or supervisor is likely to impact how favorably each party views the aftermath of anger episodes (Pauksztat, van Duijn, & Wittek, 2011). Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Relationship quality between supervisors and subordinates will positively impact perceptions of anger outcomes.

Finally, the intensity of anger expression between parties during an emotional episode may impact perceptions of outcomes, such that, with higher intensity, more negative results will emerge. Several scholars have called for more research addressing intensity (Gayle & Preiss, 1998; Gibson & Callister, 2010; Hershcovis, 2011; Jones, 2001; Laukka, Juslin, & Bresin, 2005). High levels of arousal and physiological responses stemming from intensely felt and expressed emotions can create strongly negative (fight vs. flight) reactions (Russell, 1980; see also Ashkanasy, Härtel & Zerbe, 2000). Anger expressions with greater intensity are viewed more negatively by targets (Frijda et al., 1992) and can damage existing relationships such that individuals may wish to avoid future interactions (Hareli et al., 2008). This is a key finding in significant research on negotiation, such that when opponents expressed more anger (vs. expressing more neutrality or even happiness), they did better in the negotiation, but were less likely to be viewed as a future, desirable negotiation counterpart (Van Kleef & Côté, 2007; Van Kleef & De Dreu, 2012). Therefore, we anticipate that the intensity of the emotional display would make a difference in determining anger outcomes. Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 5: Higher levels of anger intensity will negatively impact perceptions of anger outcomes.

Method

To test these hypotheses, we conducted an online survey study, utilizing Qualtrics. Surveys were distributed to alumni from graduate business programs at three different universities—one each in the west, central, and eastern United States In addition, supervisors enrolled in executive education programs and weekend graduate business programs were recruited. Reminder email surveys were sent out two and six weeks following the initial survey. We distributed 732 surveys and received 323 surveys for a 44% response rate. The survey asked respondents to recall and briefly describe a recent episode of anger at work, and then, further questions were asked about this episode. The analyses in this study used a subset of the data, focusing on supervisors and subordinate interactants, and did not include peers or observer reports. The gender mix among respondents was 31% women and 69% men. The most frequently reported age range was 26–35 years old (63%), while nine percent of the respondents reported being between 18 and 25 years old, 18% were between the ages of 36 and 45, 8% were between 46 and 55, and two percent between 56 and 65 years of age.

Measures

Role and Status

Role (target or expresser) was assessed utilizing the survey question, "Did you express anger to someone or was anger expressed to you?" *Status* was assessed by asking anger expressers, "To whom did you express anger?" (a supervisor or subordinate), while anger targets were asked, "Who expressed anger to you?" (a supervisor or subordinate).

Emotional Intensity

Emotional intensity was measured on a seven-point, three-item scale assessing survey respondents' perspective on how intense, visible, and obvious the anger was (α = .86).

Relationship Quality

Respondents were asked to characterize, using a seven-point Likert scale, the *relationship quality* with the person to whom they expressed anger or who expressed anger to them. The four-item measure assessed relationship trust, closeness, communication quality, and feeling like "family" (α = .92; see Jones & James, 1979).

Situation Improvement

To assess perceived *situation improvement* following the anger episode, we used a measure validated in previous research examining outcomes of workplace anger (see Stickney & Geddes, 2014). The measure consisted of four items that focused on whether the specific, problematic situation improved, as well as the relationship among those involved (α = .88).

Controls

In our regression analyses, we control for specific variables based on recommendations in previous research (Stickney & Geddes, 2014, 2016). Significant research demonstrates that *gender* can impact perceptions and outcomes associated with anger expression (Domagalski & Steelman, 2007; Glomb & Hulin, 1997; Sloan, 2012); therefore, we controlled for this variable. Previous research argues that norms for anger expression can shape participants' perceptions of outcomes (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Geddes & Stickney, 2011). To assess *issue importance*, respondents were asked to describe how important, significant, or concerned they were about the issue at hand. This was a three-item scale (α = .91). The

interaction frequency with the person who was the source or target of anger was assessed with a two-item scale (r = .79).

Quantitative Analysis and Results

Supervisors and subordinates typically have different perspectives on what happened in anger episodes. To test this hypothesis, we examined the variations in anger outcomes reported by supervisors and compared them to the anger outcomes reported by subordinates.

Using an ANOVA, we found support for Hypothesis 1 given a significant main effect of status on anger outcomes ($F_{(2,\ 236)}$ = 4.39, p = .003; see Figure 2, Table 1). This finding replicates and confirms the work of Fitness (2000).

Hypothesis 2 predicts a role effect such that expressing anger to either subordinates or supervisors will result in perceptions of more positive outcomes than being a target of anger from either a subordinate or a supervisor. An ANOVA shows this hypothesis was not supported ($F_{(3,\ 236)}$ = 1.11, p = .33, *ns*).

Hypothesis 3 predicts an interaction between status and role will result in differential perceptions of anger outcomes. Planned comparison contrasts tested the significance of two hypothesized interactions. To examine these, we created four variables from combinations of status and role: (a) supervisors expressers; (b) subordinate expressers; (c) subordinate targets; and (d) supervisor targets. We used planned contrasts to examine the relationship of these four variables to anger outcomes rather than the omnibus ANOVA results of status and role on anger outcomes because simple interactions prevent analyzing and understanding the impact of the directionality of anger expressions.

Hypothesis 3a predicts an interaction effect for status and role such that subordinate anger targets report the lowest level of positive outcomes from anger episodes, in comparison with the other three categories. This hypothesis was supported with a significant planned comparison analysis ($t_{(236)}$ = 2.70, p = .007). Hypothesis 3b predicts an interaction effect for status and role such that supervisor anger expressers report the highest level of positive outcomes when compared with supervisor or subordinate targets or subordinate anger expressers. The planned comparison to test this relationship was in the predicted direction, but did not reach conventional levels of significance ($t_{(236)}$ = 1.65, p = .10); thus, this hypothesis was not supported.

Hierarchical linear multiple regression tested hypotheses 4 and 5. These examined the impact of relationship quality and intensity on outcomes, while controlling for frequency of interactions and issue

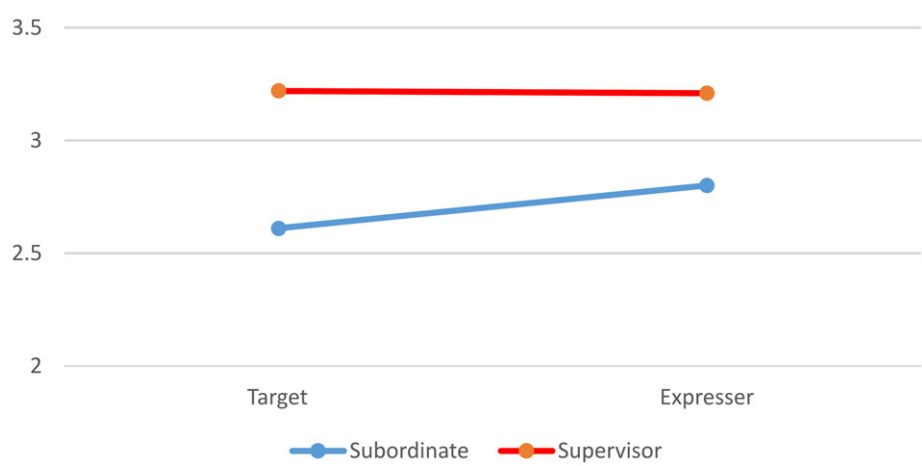

Figure 2. Situation outcome by anger expression status and role.

Table 1
Standardized Regression Equation Statistics Predicting Situation Outcome

Variable	β	*t*	*p*
Relationship quality	.155	2.06	.04*
Expression intensity	−.084	−1.14	.26
Interaction frequency	.118	1.60	.11
Issue importance	−.050	−.464	.53
Gender	.006	.09	.93
R^2	.09		
F	3.40		

*$p < .05$.

importance. Hypothesis 4 assessed the impact of relationship quality on anger outcomes. This hypothesis was confirmed with a significant hierarchical linear multiple regression analysis ($F_{(5,\ 196)} = 3.88$, $p = .002$). This indicates that relationship quality is an important variable to consider in understanding supervisor and subordinate anger outcomes in organizations ($\beta = .155$). Hypothesis 5 tested the impact of anger intensity on anger outcomes between supervisors and subordinates. Although previous studies indicate a negative effect for expression intensity (e.g., Gibson et al., 2009), this relationship was not significant in our analyses ($\beta = -.08$). Anger intensity did not impact respondents' perceptions of the situation outcome. The control variables of interaction frequency, issue importance, and gender were also not significant.

Additional analysis of anger intensity by role did show a significant effect ($t_{(223)} = -2.49$, $p = .013$). Although there was no role by status interaction effect on anger, an examination of the means shows subordinate targets report the greatest intensity of anger, while the other three groups report similar, lower levels of intensity. Thus, there was not enough difference to show an overall role effect for intensity.

Qualitative Analysis and Results

We also examined hypotheses 3a and 3b with qualitative data to illuminate the effect of status (combined with role) on positive and negative perceptions of anger outcomes in the workplace. These qualitative responses provide helpful context for and elaboration of our findings. Fifty-five respondents provided commentary on what happened during a recent anger episode at work and identified the most positive and the most negative outcomes from this episode. Descriptions of these outcomes were sorted by role and status. One author identified common themes for both negative and positive outcomes. Using this typology, two raters independently sorted responses into these categories. Initial interrater agreement rate was 85%. Raters reconciled their differences to reach 100% agreement. Most common positive anger outcomes included the following: increased learning, awareness or understanding, and solving the problem. Most common negative outcomes included the following: a damaged relationship, deteriorating trust or attitudes, and increased tension and embarrassment.

Supervisor as Expresser

By expressing anger, supervisors indicated they thought that subordinate behavior could be changed, and emotion could be used as a justifiable tool to facilitate the change. For instance, one respondent wrote, "I had to repeatedly remind [a subordinate] to prioritize his tasks. . .After the anger episode, this employee did a better job focusing on what was important." This supervisor further indicated that there was "nothing negative" about the incident. From a supervisors' perspective, anger expression was typically precipitated by a desire to change a specific subordinate behavior. Indeed, in most cases, our respondents report that supervisor anger expression worked; that is, expressed anger brought about a

required change in behavior. For example, one supervisor noted, "I was upset with a worker for not showing up on time." After expressing anger, "The worker changed his attitude and held more respect for me." Another supervisor was "frustrated by a subordinate who failed to respond to emails," and noted that following his expression of anger, "The subordinate started maintaining frequent communication."

Supervisors as expressers reported essentially a balanced mix of outcomes (10 positive, 11 negative) from their anger, suggesting the behavioral changes supervisors were attempting to implement occurred with some costs in the transaction. One supervisor noted that, "I expressed anger at my assistant when my bosses were putting pressure on me and she made a sloppy mistake." He followed up this incident by having "lunch to talk about expectations and two areas where we each could improve." Unfortunately, a "breakdown in trust" occurred following this interaction.

The predominant theme observed in the supervisor expresser anger group was anger's use as a tool to "correct" subordinate attitudes and behavior. Supervisors reported this generally worked in terms of behavioral change; however, there also appears to be some costs in terms of communication comfort and relationship trust loss in the process.

Supervisor as Target

For supervisors, anger from subordinates is a form of "employee voice" (Geddes & Callister, 2007) or "upward dissent" (Kassing, 2000, 2011; Redmond, Jameson, & Binder, 2016) and could be perceived as an opportunity to learn real attitudes about the work situation; however, it could also be seen as inappropriate and out of line. The qualitative commentary included a relatively balanced view of seven positive and six negative outcomes. Respondents reported these expressions were sometimes not particularly helpful. For example, one supervisor stated that "we had recently expanded to multisite and [a subordinate] expressed frustration at some of the challenges." He noted that the exchange "increased awareness of the situation and the challenges we were facing," but he also felt that "the negative energy did not lead to a solution-oriented discussion." However, supervisors did describe subordinate anger toward them as having some positive outcomes such as an opportunity for sharing different perspectives while also having the challenge of dealing with the negativity of subordinates. One supervisor described, as a result of their exchange, a subordinate acquiring an "increased awareness of the situation and the challenges we are facing."

Subordinate as Expresser

Expression of anger upward by subordinates, in contrast to expressing anger downward to subordinates, tends to violate expectations that emotional expression is the "right" of supervisors while subordinates should control emotions (see Gibson & Schroeder, 2002). In these types of interactions, the qualitative data show a balance of positive and negative outcomes, with 14 in each category. Nevertheless, subordinates who took the risk of expressing anger to a supervisor found some promise of improved understanding and even respect—from one's boss or for oneself. For subordinates, expressing anger to supervisors appears to be carefully considered, especially when the issue was sufficiently important. For example, one respondent noted the following: "I was upset with the director of my department. I stewed over the issue for a few days. Then I scheduled some time with him and discussed my feelings and why I was upset. He was unaware of the issue. He apologized and we discussed remedies. The issue was resolved and we understood each other better."

Another respondent indicated, "I was proud to have stood up for myself and felt more confident addressing [the problem] with him." In contrast, another subordinate who "tried to express my frustration to my first level manager and my second level manager about the uneven workload within the department," reported "nothing positive happened" from this episode; he was "told to not let others know if I was stressed by the workload." More favorably, a subordinate who "expressed anger and frustration" to his boss for unrecognized work found that after the outburst, "My boss took the initiative to

show more appreciation." In summary, it is not without risk that subordinates expressed their anger upward, but more often than not, anger expressed with caution and care did result in perceptions of positive outcomes.

Subordinate as Target

In sharp contrast to relatively balanced positive and negative outcomes reported in the three types of supervisor/subordinate anger interactions discussed previously, when subordinates reported on their experiences as targets of supervisor anger, they describe predominantly negative outcomes—reporting only 18 positive outcomes compared to 40 negative outcomes. Significantly, it also appeared the anger expressions had attitudinal and emotional effects that went beyond the focal incident. For example, one subordinate wrote that, "my boss expressed frustration that the financial reports were not in the format he preferred." The subordinate responded that she now "understood where the person stood on certain issues," but cautioned that it triggered "increased tension and fear in the office." Another example of more consequential after-effects was that "we were not on pace to hit our quarterly lead goal, and the VP of Marketing was not shy about letting us know." This episode led to the employee's perception that "morale decreased and basically the team rallied around a common dislike for the VP." Another respondent reported, "My supervisor called me out and expressed discontent at using an outside consultant." While people respected the respondent more because of the way he had handled the situation with the boss, they also were "embarrassed" by the boss's behavior and respected him less.

Table 2
Samples of Reported Outcomes Following Anger Expressions

Positive	Negative
Supervisor as expresser	
She did what I asked her to do.	Her trust in me was negatively affected. All the effort I had been putting in to build trust and respect with her was gone.
I was able to relieve my stress by confronting the employee, even though it caused tension and awkwardness.	The employee doesn't admit to needing to improve and doesn't see a need to change.
We had lunch to talk about expectations and two areas where we each could improve.	Breakdown of trust.
Supervisor as target	
Employee improved in his consistency of reporting and had clear expectations going forward.	Based on his responses and actions there was a definite loss of trust in (this) employee's honesty.
Increased awareness of the situation and the challenges we are facing.	Negative energy did not lead to a solution-oriented discussion.
We talked about the issue.	My competence as a manager was put into question with those that were present.
Subordinate as expresser	
My boss was more careful about how he represented my work to others.	More tension in relationship with boss. He was more closed toward me.
The issue was resolved and we understood each other better.	My superior's perceptions of me likely changed.
Enduring relationships and comradery were forged through the experience.	Trust and communication with this manager was damaged.
Subordinate as target	
I resolved to switch jobs and received 20% more at my new job.	Prior to this I really enjoyed my job, but after I started dreading coming in to work.
Greater understanding of mutual respect and expectations.	Decrease in trust.
I understood more clearly what upset my supervisor.	I lost respect for my supervisor.

These comments show that subordinates found expressions of anger by their supervisors to be more negative or threatening. Supervisors' anger expressions does prompt necessary behavior change—offering additional support for Fitness' findings (2000) that supervisors felt an anger episode had been "successfully resolved"—but they also seem to threaten trusting relationships. Unfortunately, supervisor expressions of anger tended to cause subordinates to reduce their trust toward and communication with these bosses. Research shows that ruptures in trusting relationships can be difficult to repair, although apologies can help this process (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004), offering hope when anger expression (by either party) prompts efforts to make amends.

Overall, subordinates' relatively negative view of being targets of supervisor anger may offset the "perceived benefit" among supervisors that their anger produced valued results. While supervisors tend to view their expressions of anger as targeted at specific, immediate behaviors of a subordinate, subordinates tend to view supervisor-expressed anger as having broader impact and longer-lasting, negative effects (see also Morrison & Rothman, 2009). Further, these effects were also often perceived as going beyond the supervisory dyad, such that supervisory anger expression was thought to affect *team* satisfaction and *organizational* morale. Thus, the qualitative commentary shows that while supervisors may at times find anger from subordinates unwelcome or inaccurate, the negative outcomes were more likely to be personally unpleasant, yet relatively inconsequential to the organization. In contrast, anger expressed to subordinates was perceived more negatively, appearing to damage the relationship of the parties, the well-being of subordinates involved, and their respective colleagues (see Table 2).

Discussion

This study contributes to scholarship on anger outcomes by confirming the significant impact of status (supervisor and subordinate) on perceived outcomes from anger expression at work. The hypothesized main effect for role (expresser or target) was not supported, suggesting that the role one enacts in an anger event does not itself influence one's perceptions of anger outcomes. The significant interaction between status and role, however, confirms that role needs to remain in the equation. Perhaps, role has an impact when expressers use enough restraint that targets respond well to the message. Although anger intensity was not a significant predictor in this study, we did not explore restraint or other aspects of the quality of the anger expression that might be explored in future research.

Qualitative data indicated that when subordinates were the targets of supervisor anger, they reported double the number of negative outcomes to positives. In contrast, the other three perspectives examined reported essentially equal positive and negative outcomes from expressed anger. These commentaries tend to support the quantitative data's significant interaction for status and role. Subordinates as targets of supervisor anger reported significantly worse anger outcomes than any of the other three interactions —subordinates as anger expressers, supervisors as anger targets, and supervisors as anger expressers. These data suggest supervisors may not be fully aware of the significant, negative consequences their expressions of anger are triggering in subordinates as evidenced by the fact that they did not report these levels of negative outcome following their expressing anger to subordinates. This finding is consistent with previous research on power in organizational relationships. For instance, supervisors generally viewed their anger expression as addressing a specific problem, not a problematic person; thus, they facilitated (in their minds) an appropriate response and ultimately a positive outcome (Steinel, Van Kleef, & Harinck, 2008). Relatedly, higher status is associated with greater authority and power, both perceived and actual. Studies of social power have shown that power holders tend to exhibit enhanced feelings of autonomy and freedom, approach-related tendencies, and less empathy toward those with less power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Snodgrass, 1992).

Our study confirms that status affects both the experience and expression of anger. High status with its emotional privileges appears to buffer supervisors from the negative effects of anger expression by subordinates. At the same time, their high status may result in supervisors being less aware of the effects

of their anger and, importantly, less aware that anger expressions were perceived by subordinates as having a more wide-ranging and negative impact on them and their team. Conversely, lower status targets with minimal emotional privilege may be more sensitive to angry supervisors than others because of the power they wield. In one sense, they may have perceived anger from supervisors more negatively than supervisors appeared to intend it. The impact of emotional privilege (or the lack thereof) is fear on the part of subordinates and lack of awareness on the part of supervisors, which can lead to negative outcomes of anger expression and suppression discussed earlier.

Implications

Differences in perceived outcomes and the extent to which negative consequences prevailed following supervisor anger expression have important implications for practice. The qualitative data suggest that supervisors as expressers tend to view their anger as targeted toward specific problems that can be resolved. By expressing anger, they see subordinate behavior change, suggesting the emotion expression is a justifiable tool. However, supervisors that express anger seem less aware of correspondently higher levels of negative outcomes when subordinates are targets of anger. Therefore, the problem remains that even if supervisors observe subordinate behavior becoming outwardly more compliant in the short term, the work environment and supervisor–subordinate relationships may suffer more significant long-term damage than leaders and managers may realize. These losses may include reduced trust and respect, decreased morale, increased complaining or criticism to others, and withdrawal behaviors.

When subordinates express anger to supervisors, they risk serious negative consequences because these expressions may be judged as inappropriate or deviant (Geddes & Callister, 2007). Although some employee anger may be self-serving and not beneficial, we contend that supervisors who respond with concern and an interest in problem-solving instead of defensiveness and sanctions are more likely to find valuable information about serious organizational problems (Geddes & Stickney, 2011). Rather than view this anger as antisocial and challenging—as "insubordination" or "disrespect"—it could signal trust in management's response. If a subordinate approaches management, even in anger, his or her action typically reflects a belief that management can and will address serious wrongs. However, if supervisors maintain unfavorable assumptions regarding subordinate anger expression, they may make decisions that adversely affect important organizational outcomes, including talent retention, subordinate morale and productivity, and continuous learning/improvement. For instance, if a supervisor reacts angrily to subordinate anger expression or does nothing in response to the subordinate's protest (Geddes & Stickney, 2011), the consequences tend to go beyond the dyadic relationship. Such an episode tends to be seen and/or reported to a wider audience of teammates and other staff, which can lead to negative effects for building a workplace climate of trust and transparency (Barsade, 2002; Geddes & Callister, 2007). As several respondents in our study reported, subordinates who are the target of supervisor anger may feel threatened and less likely to take a risk by reporting negative feedback or bad news upward, which could prove essential for supervisors to hear. Thus, sanctions on subordinates expressing anger—or indifference to their complaint—may have wider effects beyond one individual subordinate, lowering overall morale and productivity.

The implications of these findings also suggest that both supervisors and subordinates regulate anger. Subordinates regulate their expressions of anger because they fear sanctions if they are regarded as troublemakers or unprofessional. Consequently, these potential expressions are often muffled and suppressed at work (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). It may take extra emotional energy—generated by serious inequity, safety or justice issues—to motivate subordinates to confront supervisors about problems that negatively affect subordinates or the organization as a whole (Geddes & Stickney, 2012; Kramer & Hess, 2002; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Using their best communication skills when expressing their angry feelings and concerns to supervisors will likely improve their odds of achieving positive outcomes. However, our results suggest supervisors tend to perceive such

expressions more positively than subordinates might realize. Relatedly, given emotional privilege, supervisors theoretically have more leeway to express their anger for subordinate poor performance and other infractions (Averill, 1997; Baron, 1990). However, they are also limited by norms of professionalism, directives to instill confidence among subordinates, and policies preventing bullying. Organizational norms of propriety also regulate both supervisor and subordinate anger (Geddes & Callister, 2007). Therefore, both sides of the dyad have reasons to control the expression of strongly felt emotion.

Given the importance of relationship quality in improving anger outcomes and the potential high damage when subordinates are the targets of anger, it is likely to be valuable for supervisors to create opportunities for building trust. Building relationships and improving communication between supervisor and subordinate could be important preventatives that increase opportunities to resolve conflicts before anger expressions occur or minimize the negative outcomes that might follow. Recent studies examining the superior–subordinate relationship quality, conflict management style, and subordinate upward dissent tactics confirm that favorable relationships will facilitate upward dissent—in all its forms (Redmond et al., 2016). In addition, high-quality superior–subordinate relationships were related to managers using a more integrative conflict management style, which is characterized as being open to learning from and understanding the others' perspective and attempting to reach a consensual decision regarding disagreements. Such qualities and communication skill exhibited by managers will allow a greater free-flow of information (and emotion) from their employees. Most importantly, we suggest the need for those with higher authority in the workplace to be sensitive to relational needs and trust as they express strong emotion. Supervisor anger demonstrates a much broader reach and has more negative impact than is commonly recognized by expressers. If there is a strong working relationship, anger displays can produce desired behavior results with fewer negative outcomes. At the same time, supervisors need to provide opportunities for and develop enough trust with subordinates that they will speak up when something is upsetting enough to trigger anger. Minimally, this expression will generate communication between supervisors and subordinates and better understanding (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Steinel et al., 2008).

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of this study include the use of self-report survey data, which increases the risk that relationships may be inflated by common method bias especially when using perceptual measures (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). We minimized this risk using categorical variables of status (supervisor or subordinate) and role (expresser or target) for the independent variables which are less likely to inflate results from analyses based on correlations between perceptual measures. We also supplemented our quantitative anger outcome data with qualitative commentary regarding perceived anger outcomes to further reduce method bias. Another potential limitation of self-report data about anger expressions is recall bias. Although anger episodes are often more memorable than many interactions, the details may be skewed somewhat when recalled later, possibly influenced by self-presentation concerns. (Clark, Pataki, & Carver, 1996). Examining these and other questions with experimental or observational research may offset this potential bias.

This study collected status data, but it did not measure individuals' power in relationship to the other party. Previous work on power (Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011) found an interaction such that when status was low and power with high, these low-status individual were judged more negatively while high-status individuals were perceived more positively regardless of power level. This suggests that it would be beneficial for future research on anger to assess power levels as well as status. In addition, while we found no difference between male and female respondents, the imbalance in our sample with more men than women (less than one-third of our sample were female) might have influenced the results. Given studies showing significant gender differences in both expressing and responding to anger and anger-related, emotion (Crowley & Knowles, 2014; Gianakos, 2002; Kring & Gordon, 1998; Salerno & Peter-Hagen, 2015), additional research using a sample with a more comparable gender ratio could be beneficial.

In our qualitative data, when respondents were asked to describe anger, they used a variety of words such as tension, frustration, upset, and negative energy. In the respondents' minds, these may be describing anger, while in scholars' views, these words may be describing feelings beyond anger. Analyzing respondents' meanings of various terms used in describing anger is an area for future research to determine which of the many anger terms are synonymous.

To overcome these limitations, additional research on the quality of anger outcomes within organizations would be valuable. Specifically, examining this phenomenon with different methods such as observational or quasi-experimental studies within organizations could be useful to replicate and extend these findings. Experimental approaches, for example, could be used to examine more fine-grained questions about the extent to which status shapes anger experience and expression. Being able to more specifically calibrate the level of status could identify specific moderators and mediators in the status–anger process. Moreover, further study could provide additional context for the impact of role (as target or expresser) in this relationship. While we did not find role matters as much as status, further exploration of this variable is needed. Another area needing investigation is the degree to which *acquiring* status shapes future anger expressions. The dyads we examined were largely existing relationships where patterns of emotional expression would have been shaped by the organizational context as well as the history of interaction between participants. Assessing the effect of status could be isolated with more certainty if the impact could be discovered based on acquiring (or losing) status in a particular relationship.

Finally, a result that could surprise some and justify future research is that subordinate anger expressers did not report significant negative outcomes. This may be because they were able to temper their anger enough that their supervisors could recognize justification for their anger. Even without tempering, some problems may be important enough that the supervisor focused on the problem, not the tone of the delivery. This is a potentially important area for additional research.

Ultimately, this study leads to the conclusion that workplace anger has the potential to provide opportunities for needed dialogue between supervisors and subordinates. The challenge remains, however, for both low- and high-status individuals to express anger in ways that increase the likelihood of favorable outcomes. If the focus can remain on addressing the problem, rather than on personal defensiveness or sanctioning actions, both parties may be better able to contribute to the process of resolving the difficult issues and conflicts that arise daily in the workplace. Conscientiousness and care in anger expression as well as an understanding of anger's potential risks and benefits should help supervisors and their subordinates better identify and resolve problematic situations at work.

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