



An Unlikely Pair? Anger and Kindness

People United Research Article (Published 20 November 2014)

By Julie Van-De-Vyver

*If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality. **Desmond Tutu***

Anger is a negative emotion, which increases aggression and violence, right? This may be partially true, but this view also hides some of the really powerful and positive effects that anger can have. In this article I will explain how a specific type of anger can actually increase kindness and social action and I will show you evidence for this claim.

Usually when you feel angry it is because someone has harmed you in some way. In this situation, the only possible response is communication (e.g., forgiveness, punishment) with your perpetrator, alternatively you can choose to take no action. But what about when you witness someone harm someone else? In this situation, you can communicate with the perpetrator as before, but you can also choose to support the victim (e.g., compensation, help), or again you can choose to take no action. While many people think that anger mostly, if not solely, increases punishment, a study by Sebastian Lotz and his colleagues (2011) showed that, on the contrary, when people witnessed an injustice against someone else, they were more likely to compensate the victim than to punish the perpetrator.

The idea that anger is associated with kindness is not a new one in academia and many academic studies have shown that anger can increase our willingness to help others (our kindness). For example, a study by Martijn van Zomeren and his colleagues (2004) showed that anger at an authority for their unfair treatment of another group positively predicted people's willingness to participate in collective action to support that group (e.g., participate in a demonstration, sign a petition). Another study by Cheryl Wakslak and her colleagues (2007) showed that anger was positively associated with intentions to support community programs (e.g., donating

money, volunteering) and support for the redistribution of resources. Other academic research has also shown that feelings of anger following exposure to victims' stories of poverty positively predict intentions to donate money and to join volunteer groups (Montada & Schneider, 1989).

Anger is also strongly related to wanting to uphold justice. For example, Aarti Iyer and her colleagues (2007) found that British people's anger at the American government for the occupation of Iraq predicted people's willingness to take political action (e.g., confronting those responsible for Iraq by signing a petition). In a study by Jorg Lindenmeier and colleagues (2012), anger following unethical corporate conduct positively predicted boycotting intentions.

These are only a small number of studies that show empirically how anger has the potential to relate positively with kindness, social action, and the desire to uphold justice. Many more studies show similar results. The main message is that anger can be a very powerful tool for increasing positive social action. Organisations such as Avaaz (the online activist network) seem to have tapped into these insights already, but many more should get in line if their goal is to motivate action. Indeed, this line of research suggests that anger can motivate people to help Desmond Tutu's mouse.

References

- Iyer, A., Schmader, T., & Lickel, B. (2007). Why individuals protest the perceived transgressions of their country: The role of anger, shame, and guilt. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.
- Lindenmeier, J., Schleer, C., & Pricl, D. (2012). Consumer outrage: Emotional reactions to unethical corporate behavior. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(9), 1364-1373.
- Lotz, S., Okimoto, T. G., Schlösser, T., & Fetschenhauer, D. (2011). Punitive versus compensatory reactions to injustice: Emotional antecedents to third-party interventions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47(2), 477-480.
- Montada, L., & Schneider, A. (1989). Justice and emotional reactions to the disadvantaged. *Social Justice Research*, 3(4), 313-344.
- Van Zomeren, M., Spears, R., Fischer, A. H., & Leach, C. W. (2004). Put your money where your mouth is! Explaining collective action tendencies through group-based anger and group efficacy. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 87(5), 649.
- Wakslak, C. J., Jost, J. T., Tyler, T. R., & Chen, E. S. (2007). Moral outrage mediates the dampening effect of system justification on support for redistributive social policies. *Psychological Science*, 18(3), 267-274.