



The power of status: What determines one's reactions to anger in a social situation? ☆



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 February 2017

Received in revised form 23 March 2017

Accepted 24 March 2017

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Anger experience

Observed anger reactions

Status position

Gender differences

ABSTRACT

The present study examined how social status and gender determine anger expression and behavioral reactions toward experienced anger. In two experiments, anger was induced in a staged social interaction. Behavioral anger reactions were judged by observers. In Experiment 1 (*equal status condition*; $N = 110$) participants were provoked by a confederate, in Experiment 2 (*low status condition*; $N = 116$) participants were provoked by the experimenter. We found that participants expressed their anger to a lesser extent, were less resistant, and engaged in submissive behaviors if they had a lower status than the anger-target. As expected, gender had a moderating effect: While women's anger reactions were affected by having a lower status than the anger-target, men's anger reactions were affected by low status only when interacting with a female anger-target. Our findings provide new evidence regarding behavioral reactions to anger.

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1. Introduction

Emotion theories posit that typically anger is evoked by aversive stimuli, harm (Berkowitz & Harmon-Jones, 2004), or in reaction to blameworthy behavior of others (Weber, 2004). Anger is commonly associated with aggressive behavior, which is considered a behavioral reaction to anger, making aggression and its inhibition the main objects of study (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Berkowitz, 1993). However, research has suggested that an aggressive reaction to anger rarely occurs in daily life and it is not possible to describe a typical reaction to anger (Averill, 1982). Anger has been described as an approach-related emotion and it has been argued that approach tendencies also underlie many behavioral reactions to anger (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). The approach system organizes behavior involved in achieving desired rewards and goals, whereas the inhibition system organizes behavior involved in avoiding threats and punishment. However, in interpersonal contexts, a broad range of distinct reactions to anger exist that individuals may show (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, & Meulders, 2004). There are conceptions that make more fine-grained distinction of given every day behavioral reactions to anger (Kubiak, Wiedig-Allison, Zigoriecki, & Weber, 2011). In the present study, we focus on providing non-aggressive feedback, showing humor and venting anger—all examples of anger

approach behavior—and submission, downplaying, and distraction—all examples of anger inhibition behavior.

1.1. The effect of status position on reactions to anger

In a social interaction, an individual may express his or her anger in order to force a change in the behavior of the anger-eliciting person (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). Although anger motivates resistance against the harm-inducing behavior of others, assertiveness is required to express anger (Weber & Wiedig-Allison, 2007) as anger expression might communicate the sender's relative dominance over the receiver (Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2005; Knutson, 1996). The status position in a social hierarchy also influences anger expression in a social interaction (Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000). Thus, status differences between the person who elicits anger (i.e., the target of anger) and the person who experiences anger may therefore influence the displayed anger behavior. Despite the profound social relevance of this issue, the relationship between status position and emotions has received little systematic empirical or theoretical attention (Tiedens et al., 2000). Only a few studies have been conducted demonstrating the influence of status on anger-related behavior. In all of these studies, people have tended to behave differently when they occupied low- versus high-status positions, with anger expression inhibited when communicating with those who are higher on the hierarchical ladder, and more overtly expressed when communicating with those who are lower in status (Allan & Gilbert, 2002). Having lower status increases the tendency to inhibit anger expression (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) and people in low status position less

☆ This research was supported by the German Research Foundation (grant number UK 2465/1-2).

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frequently express anger than do people in high status positions (Tiedens, 2001). People in high status positions speak and interrupt more often compared to people in low status position (Ng, Bell, & Brooke, 1993), with this representing a low intensity aggressive act intended to maintain a dominant position. Studies have also shown that individuals report more anger suppression and less confrontational behavior toward anger-eliciting agents who are of higher status (Berkowitz, 1993; Fitness, 2000, Harris, 1976); in contrast, they report more anger expression toward anger-eliciting agents who are of equal or lower status (Kuppens et al., 2004).

In sum, previous research suggests that having lower status position decreases the tendency to engage in approach behavior and increases the tendency to inhibit behavior, while having higher status position increases the tendency to engage in approach behavior and increases the tendency to inhibit behavior. In the case of anger, this could be translated into a higher tendency to express anger and display anger-approach behavior (e.g., providing feedback or venting anger) toward a target of equal status, and a higher tendency to suppress anger and display anger-inhibition behavior (e.g., submission) toward a target of higher status.

1.2. The moderating effect of gender

Most research has failed to show gender differences in the frequency or quality of feelings of anger (Archer, 2004; Campbell, 2006), and findings on gender differences in reactions to anger have been inconsistent (for a review see Brody, 1997; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Kring, 2000). Only a few studies have investigated gender differences in observer-judged anger reactions and, as with self-report studies in this area, they have produced inconsistent findings. Fischer and Evers (2011) have argued that the inconsistencies in empirical findings regarding gender differences in anger reactions may be due to the different contexts in which they have been studied, with the social roles of gender and the gender of the anger-target discussed as key context factors. Social role theory posits that gender differences in reactions to anger mainly result from the fact that women and men occupy different roles (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000), with women being, stereotypically, more likely to have a lower status than men in both social organizations and in private contexts (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Moreover, the gender of the anger-target may have contributed to the conflicting findings in studies on gender differences in anger reactions. Some studies have found that when the target of anger is male, individuals are more likely to express their anger than when the anger-target is female (Blier & Blier-Wilson, 1989; Brody, Lovas, & Hay, 1995; Timmers, Fischer, & Manstaed, 1998). Research on aggressive behavior indicates that aggression is more likely in same-gender dyads than in opposite-gender dyads (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996) and that individuals have a higher tendency to react with aggression toward a male target compared to a female target (Harris, 1992). With regard to anger reactions like those that might take place within everyday behavior, Weber and Wiedig-Allison (2007) found that venting anger was more common with a female anger-target, while submission and distraction were more common when interacting with a male anger-target. Although few of these studies emphasized the status distributions of the interaction partners, together this body of research has shown that social status, the gender of the angry individual, the gender of the target of anger, and interactions among these factors all seem to affect reactions to anger.

1.3. The present study

In the present study, we investigated the effect of the factors of status, and gender on observer-judged anger expression and reactions. We conducted a study with two similar laboratory experiments that differed only in the status position of the anger-target. In Experiment 1 (*equal status condition*), the anger-target was ostensibly another participant, but in fact a confederate. The anger-target was therefore of equal

status to the participant. In Experiment 2 (*low status condition*), the experimenter was the anger-target; this created a status gap, with the participants having lower status position. We opted for a type of provocation that previous research has shown to produce equal responses in men and women (Denson, Fabiansson, Creswell, & Pederson, 2009). In the present study, we focused on overt behavioral reactions to anger (providing feedback, humor, venting anger, submission, downplaying, and distraction) that are common everyday reactions to an anger experience (Kubiak et al., 2011; Weber, 2004) and assessed anger reactions via observer ratings.

We had two goals in conducting this study: The first goal was to examine how status position influences observer-judged reactions to anger. In line with previous research, which has found that anger reactions are more inhibited toward those who are higher on the hierarchical ladder and vice versa (Allan & Gilbert, 2002), we anticipated that participants with a lower status position (*low status condition*) would behave more submissively and less aggressively than when both interaction partners had equal status position (*equal status condition*). Specifically, we predicted that participants would express their anger less, display more anger inhibition reactions (i.e., submission, downplaying, distraction) and show less anger approach reactions (i.e., venting anger, feedback, humor) when they had a lower status position, as compared to when they had an equal status position.

The second goal was to observe if and how gender moderated the anticipated effects of status position. Social role theory suggests that status and gender may be confounded because of the existing unequal gender distribution regarding higher and lower status roles (Eagly et al., 2000). Based on previous research and theoretical considerations, we anticipated no main effects of gender on observer ratings of anger reactions. However, we anticipated that the status and gender of the anger-target might have different effects on the anger reactions of women and men. We expected that women would be more affected by the effect of low status than men because women are typically much more likely to have lower statuses (in terms of degree of power over others) than men. Specifically, we predicted that, in the low status condition experiment, women would express less anger, engage in less anger-approach behavior and more anger inhibition behavior than men. In contrast, we anticipated that men would be most strongly affected by having a lower status when interacting with a female anger-target (i.e., male participant and female researcher), as this constellation represent the greatest divergence from stereotypical gender-role conforming behavior. Specifically, we predicted that men would express more anger, engage in more anger approach behavior, and engage in less anger inhibition behavior when they had a lower status than a female anger-target than when they had a male anger-target.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

As participants needed to be blind to the true aim of the study, flyers were posted on the University of Mainz (in Germany) campus recruiting for a study on “skills in problem solving and personality”¹. Only undergraduates who were not majoring in psychology were eligible to participate. Participants were entered into a drawing to win one of four 50 EUR (approx. US\$ 68) vouchers for an online bookstore as compensation for participation. The total initial sample for Experiment 1 (*equal status condition*) was $N = 131$ (56% female) for, and Experiment 2 (*low status condition*) was $N = 125$ (55% female).

Data from 30 participants had to be excluded: twelve participants (eight women, four men) were aware of the real aim of the experiment; additionally, four women had to be excluded due to a failure in the procedure, and nine participants (six women, three men) had to be excluded because of missing videotape recordings. This left a total of 226 participants (Experiment 1: $N = 110$; Experiment 2: $N = 116$) aged 18 to 51 years (119 women, age $M = 23.52$ years, $SD = 4.31$) for the

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