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## Sex and gender role differences in anger: an Australian community study

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### Abstract

Anger is a commonly experienced emotion popularly thought to differ for men and women. Studies have produced conflicting evidence for sex differences on measures of anger often due to definitional confusion, methodological limitations, the use of non-random samples and the use of student and clinical populations. Some previous studies have suggested that males and females do not differ in measures of anger and that gender role identification may be more predictive of patterns of anger experience and expression. This study aimed to investigate the influence of sex, gender role identification and sex of the target of anger on measures of state and trait anger in a community sample of the Australian population. Results supported the prediction that gender role identification rather than sex were related to anger experience, expression and control, with this finding being consistent across two situational contexts. Sex of the target of anger was found to provide a weak contextual influence on male and female expression of anger. The implications of these findings for future research and for those working with anger in clinical settings are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Anger; Gender roles; Sex differences; Relational schemas

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### 1. Introduction

The experience of anger is a common emotional phenomenon. Averill (1982) found that members of the general community reported becoming angry on an average of one to two times a week. A commonly held lay notion of sex differences in anger is that men are generally more

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comfortable with the expression and experience of anger than women (Brody, 1985). However, there is limited empirical evidence to support this view with studies conducted reporting inconsistent findings (Sharkin, 1993). Studies that have reported sex differences have focused on the control of anger (Malatesta-Magai, Jonas, Shepard, & Culver, 1992), in confidence to express anger (Blier & Blier-Wilson, 1989), in the experience of anger (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992), and in the number of anger arousing incidents experienced and in the nature of anger reactions to these incidents (Biaggio, 1989). In contrast, a series of studies by Deffenbacher et al. (1996) failed to identify differences in the experience or expression of anger between men and women. In essence, women were equally able to express anger appropriately and effectively as men (Averill, 1983; Tavris, 1989).

An alternative line of research has been to examine the effect of gender role identification rather than sex on measures of trait anger. Gender role refers to internalised characteristics culturally regarded as appropriate behaviour for males and females (Bem, 1984). A typology of four gender roles was proposed by Taylor and Hall (1981) these being masculine, feminine, androgynous and undifferentiated. Psychological androgyny is understood as the non-reliance on purely masculine or feminine gender roles and combines both roles to cognitively organise information (Bem, 1984). Studies by Kopper (1993) and Kopper and Epperson (1991, 1996) have reported differences between participants classified as having a masculine, feminine, androgynous and undifferentiated gender role on trait anger, anger expression and anger control. Masculine participants were found to be more prone to anger, more likely to express anger outwardly and less likely to control anger expression.

To date explorations of sex differences in anger have focussed generally on the gender of the participant and have not considered the sex of the target to whom the anger is directed (Harris, 1994). Participants in Averill's (1982) study indicated that the majority of angry episodes involved friends or loved ones and that overall anger was directed to male targets. In scenarios that involved a male target deemed to be at fault, males reported higher levels of outward anger expression. Brody, Lovas, and Hay (1995) similarly found that adult females were less likely to express anger at a male than to a female target. These studies indicate that the presence of a male target differentially influences male and female anger experience and expression. Furthermore, previous research has lacked conceptual clarity often using definitions of anger, aggression and hostility interchangeably (Deffenbacher, et al., 1996; Wallbott & Scherer, 1989), and likewise concepts of sex, gender and gender role (Ashmore, 1990) these contributing to field confusion, methodological and measurement difficulties. Previous research has also had limited applicability to the general community through the use of convenience or other non-random sampling methods (Averill, 1982; Sharkin, 1993), the utilization of students (Thomas, 1993) and clinical samples (Selby, 1984).

The aim of the present study was to analyze the effects of participant sex (male and female) and gender role identity (masculine, feminine, androgynous and undifferentiated) on dependent measures of anger (trait and state anger, anger expression and control), and to examine these effects across different situational contexts when the sex of the target (male and female) is manipulated. It was predicted that gender would not significantly contribute to differences in measures of state or trait anger but that gender role identification would emerge as a significant influence. It was hypothesised that individuals classified as masculine will report high levels of trait anger and outward anger expression, and lower levels of anger control and inward anger expression. Finally

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