



## Expressions of anger in Israeli workplaces: The special place of customer interactions

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### ABSTRACT

We examine norms regarding displays of anger in interactions with different target persons in Israeli organizations. Israeli university students who had been employed in the last year were asked about displaying anger to managers, subordinates, coworkers, customers and customer service representatives. For comparison, data about displays of another negative emotion—fear—were also collected. Our predictions—that anger expression is influenced by the power of the target person—were supported. There was stronger agreement that anger should be suppressed with managers than with coworkers and subordinates. Agreement that anger should be suppressed was also stronger regarding displays toward customers than toward coworkers, subordinates and managers. Norms of suppressing anger were particularly strong for displays toward customers, and far stronger than the parallel of customers' displays toward customer service representatives. These findings are suggested to imply the penetration of global customer service norms to the Israeli economy.

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### 1. Introduction

Socially learned norms inform individuals whether and how to express emotions in social interactions (Ekman, 1972; Ekman & Oster, 1979). These norms, sometimes referred to as “display rules”, vary by the type of emotion, as well as to whom and when the emotion is felt (Ekman, 1993, p. 384; Matsumoto et al., 1998; Matsumoto et al., 2005). Norms are also culture-specific, since they are learned in the early stages of childhood socialization (Buss & Kiel, 2004; Saarni, 1979). Particularly important are norms about the expression or control of felt anger, because of the possible negative social implications of anger expressions (Saarni & von Salisch, 1993; Underwood, 1997; von Salisch & Vogelgesang, 2005).

Display rules are also relevant to organizational interactions (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; 1989), since norms for emotion displays are connected to organizational values and goals (Martin et al., 1998; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). Both in organizations and at the culture level, not all participants necessarily agree about emotion display rules, suggesting a need to talk about norm strength, or “the degree to which a norm is widely shared (consensus) and deeply internalized (potency) among a given aggregate of people” (cf. Jackson, 1965, cited in Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993: 91).

Research on organizational emotion rules has focused on the effects and consequences of expectations regarding displayed emotion in work roles (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Elfenbein, 2008; Grandey & Brauburger, 2002; Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; Van Maanen, 1992; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989) and has presented display rules as a function of societal norms, occupational norms, and organizational norms (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). A separate but complementary stream considers emotion displays as elements of a culture (Kupperbusch et al., 1999). This line of work attempts to identify

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explanations for cultural differences and similarities in emotional displays (Ekman, 1972; Friesen, 1972; Matsumoto, 1993; Matsumoto et al., 2008; Suh et al., 1998).

The present paper, consistent with the focus of this special issue, reports on emotion display rules in the unique culture of Israel, with a further special focus on anger display rules. Below, we first review the merit of a focus on the display rules regarding the specific emotion of anger. We then describe the pertinence of hierarchical power structures in organizations to norms of anger expression, and connect the relative power of different organizational target persons with anger display rules. In an empirical study we then compare the perceptions of Israeli college students who had recent or current employment experience regarding anger display rules toward different organizational target persons. Our survey asked participants to indicate whether they felt they should express or suppress anger in interactions with different target persons in the work context, where the target persons varied in the status they held in the organizational setting. Our analysis of these data identifies similarities and differences in norms regarding anger expressions to target persons of different work status in Israel.

### 1.1. Emotion display rules and specific emotions

The display of emotion in the workplace follows organizational display rules that are manipulated through organizational selection, socialization and control processes (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; 1989). Thus, emotion display in organizations is subject to simultaneous and potentially competing effects of social-cultural norms and organizational norms (Rafaeli & Sutton; 1987; 1989). In fact, display rules tend to be stronger in work contexts than in general social or home interactions (Bongard & al'Absi, 2003; Lively & Powell, 2006).

Importantly, little is known about how displays of specific emotions vary between specific people and specific times. Presumably, people adjust their emotion displays to the context, or as Ekman (1972) put it, they determine *which* emotions may be displayed *when* and to *whom*. But research on organizational display rules has not specifically explored displays of discrete emotions in the workplace, instead referring to generally “negative” or “positive” emotions (Barsade et al., 2003; Brief & Weiss, 2002). Anger is a specific negative emotion that is known to occur in the workplace (Fitness, 2000; Glomb, 2002; Grandey et al., 2002) and that may involve a tendency to harm or strike out at others. Anger display rules are likely to differ from display rules for other emotions; anger expression is known to be bounded by thresholds of legitimate expression (Geddes & Callister, 2007), probably because of the potential harm that anger expressions can have on relationships (Averill, 1982).

An analysis of anger cannot be complete without some comparison to another discrete negative emotion. As a frame of comparison we therefore examine display rules for fear. Fear is similar to anger in having a high arousal response with unpleasant associations and causes. However, anger implies social stratification more than fear (Tiedens, 2001), and angry agents stand out as powerful while fearful agents are viewed as weak (Hess et al., 2000; Marsh et al., 2005). From an employment perspective, where one may want to show dominance and competence, expressing both fear and anger may result in negative outcomes, but anger expressions create power differences, while fear expressions convey weakness. Therefore, appearing anxious and incompetent may be less acceptable in organizational settings than expressing the negative yet dominant emotion of anger, consistent with Tiedens's (2001) work.

In fact, some research has suggested that avoiding the appearance of weakness is central to Israeli identity (Roniger & Feige, 1993). Seemingly weak is often referred to as being a “freier” (a huge insult, meaning a “sucker” in Hebrew slang); as Roniger and Feige (1993) note, Israelis invest heavily in not looking like a “freier”. Thus, it can be predicted:

**Hypothesis 1.** Stronger norms will dictate suppressing displays of fear than displays of anger, regardless of the person to whom the emotion is expressed.

**Hypothesis 1** distinguishes between displays of fear and anger, but does not differentiate between the targets to whom the emotion is expressed. However, expressions of anger are likely to be considered more appropriate when they are directed by a high-status group member toward a low status member (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Geddes & Callister, 2007)—for instance, by supervisors wishing to motivate or discipline lower-status employees (Glomb & Hulin, 1997). Next, we suggest that the power of the target is likely to determine the extent to which expressing anger is viewed as legitimate.

### 1.2. Anger displays toward different organizational target persons

Research on emotion displays in organizations has focused primarily on displays required from customer service representatives in their interactions with customers (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Grandey et al., 2004; Grandey et al., 2005; Hochschild, 1983). But some research suggests that display norms govern emotion displays in various organizational interactions, not only those between customer service providers and customers. A second goal of this effort, therefore, is to understand whether in Israel there is a difference between display rules governing interactions toward customers versus other work targets.

We begin the analysis of anger display rules toward different targets by examining expressions of anger toward managers. Managers are critical to the hierarchical foundation of organizations (Astley & Sachdeva, 1984; Brass, 1984; Pfeffer, 1981; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Managers typically have more power than their subordinates, which means that they control key resources such as supplies, information, and pay (Pfeffer, 1981; Ulrich & Barney, 1984). In comparison, coworkers generally hold equivalent organizational power (French & Raven, 1959). Emotional expressions are related to social power or status (Allan & Gilbert, 2002;

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