

ANGER ON TELEVISION

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Growing up and living with television exposes viewers to a wide range of people, situations, conflicts, attitudes and emotions. Anger, one of the most volatile human expression, involves all of these. What are television's contributions to the manifestations and management of anger? That is the question addressed in this study. The objective was to observe, classify, and record manifestations of anger in a sample of dramatic network programs (including action, "reality," comedy, general drama, etc.), in order to derive some implications useful for the professional, the parent, and the viewer.

The analysis

The study on which this report is based involved the analysis of 121 prime time and 38 Saturday morning children's programs, a total of 159 entertainment programs aired on four television networks during the 1993-94 season. A total of 1,014 "anger scenes" were found and analyzed. Out of a total of 1,926 characters analyzed, 25.9 percent expressed anger. Their characteristics, violence and victimization, and ways of venting and/or managing anger were observed and tabulated. All tabulations can be found in the Appendix.

Additional information came from the Annenberg School Script Archive, containing scripts of dramatic programs aired on television. Results of the script analysis are not included in the Appendix tables. The Script Archive was searched for illustrative material and some observations that could be best made from scripts. A random selection of 13 scripts containing anger scenes and 48 angry characters (out of 306 total character population) was analyzed for those purposes.

Anger was observed as an overt expression affecting a character physiologically, cognitively, and/or behaviorally. Units of analysis were the program as a whole, the "anger scene," and every speaking part in the plays. The anger scene was action involving an angry character. The scene ended when a new character appeared, or the angry character left, or when the anger subsided, or when the scene shifted for other reasons. Methods of coding and reliability are described in reports listed in the Bibliography. The overall reliability of observations was 96 percent agreement between coders.

The analysis was conducted by the Cultural Indicators (CI) research team at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. CI is an ongoing research project that monitors television and relates it to viewers' conceptions of reality. The research began in 1967-68 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, The White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American

Medical Association, the Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the Hose Bunka Foundation of Japan, the Screen Actors' Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the National Cable Television Association, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Ark Foundation, Inc., the Turner Broadcasting System, the Women's Initiative of the American Association of Retired Persons, and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the U.S. Public Health Service. Research assistance for this study was provided by S. Marcus Hswe, John Sullivan, Sheila Collins, and Sheila Witherington.

Results

It is important to consider the strengths and limitations of this study. It was not designed to deal with individual programs viewers might select (except for some examples of scenes cited later). It was not designed to seek "good" or "bad" ways of expressing or managing anger, but for typical and aggregate dramatic manifestations that are inescapable and must be confronted in any educational or therapeutic effort addressing the problem of anger. In other words, the study was designed to reveal what no other method can show, i.e. features cutting across all programming and underlying messages about anger that large communities absorb over long periods of time. That birds-eye-view brings out features not observable otherwise: the demography and action structure of angry characters, and the general ways television drama uses anger, which is primarily as a dramatic device and method of characterization.

The most important contribution of this study is a realistic understanding of what any therapeutic or counseling effort is up against. Understanding the general cultural territory in which any corrective effort takes place is the first requirement for success; without such understanding, even the most skillful intervention is likely to fail or have only short-lived success. Furthermore, when working with television professionals, only such an aggregate view can address problems that dramatic formulas pose for writers and directors, and can, therefore, discuss how to overcome them.

Anger is frequently seen on television. Almost three-quarters (72.7 percent) of all prime time programs, and all Saturday morning children's programs contain anger scenes. More than nine out of ten (94.1 percent) of prime time "action" programs, nearly as many (84.3 percent) situation comedies, and over half (52.9 percent) general drama programs contain anger scenes. There is probably no comparable source of information about expressions of anger in our culture.

In prime time, about one in four (24.7 percent) of all characters and more than half (54.6 percent) of major characters express anger. In Saturday morning children's programs, nearly a third (31.4 percent) of all characters and 65.2 percent of major characters express anger.

(41.4 percent), threatening (31.8 percent), crying (13.8 percent), cursing (12.1 percent), and breaking things (9.4 percent).

For example, in the sitcom, "Blossom," Six and her mother are arguing because Six's mother does not approve of her boyfriend. Six's mother shouts at Six and demands that she not date him anymore.

Seeking revenge and blaming occurs in "Married with Children" when Kelly and Bud are angry that their dates left them. They blame their dates for the disappointment and devise a plan to take revenge; they lure a dog into their date's car.

Insulting is an expression of anger in "Melrose Place" as Michael and Jane are arguing about their divorce settlement. Michael believes Jane received too much money and accuses her of being a "greedy gold-digger." Insulting almost leads to blows in "21 Jumpstreet" from the Script Archive, when local boys confront two Asian college students getting in line at a local cafe. One of the local says "Hey, they don't serve that Moo Goo Goo here." One of the students replies "I see they serve idiots," to which the local retorts "What did you say, zipperhead?" when the scene shifts.

Crying "unfair" happens when Harlan, in "Evening Shade" discusses Ava's sex life in court. Ava is upset and insists that such invasion of privacy is unfair; Harlan has no right to discuss her personal life.

An example of threatening is in "Northern Exposure" when Joel gets angry at the electrician who is fixing his VCR. He does not believe the VCR was properly fixed and threatens to report it to the Better Business Bureau.

Crying is a way of venting anger in the TV movie "A Child Too Many." Patty learns, after giving birth to twins, that the Davis family only wants to adopt the male twin, not the female. She is outraged that they would split up the infant twins and cries bitterly, hoping that Mr. and Mrs. Davis will reconsider.

Foul language (cursing) is heard (to the extent allowed on television) in "Murphy Brown" as Stuart, a lawyer, is offended when the FYI staff starts insulting lawyers. As Stuart reprimands the staff, he says "damn."

Hurting, breaking, destroying includes physical retaliation and taking out frustrations and anger on inanimate objects. In the show "Top Cops" a man is upset because his wife and daughter have locked him out of the house. He releases his anger by banging on the door. In the film "When Harry Met Sally," the two main characters, are bickering at their friends' wedding. Harry makes a comment that infuriates Sally, and Sally slaps him.

There is a substantial gender difference. Men are more likely to shout, break, threaten, hurt and curse; women are more likely to blame, insult, say "unfair," and cry.

Every manifestation of anger is amplified in Saturday morning children's programs. Gender differences also tend to be wider. Angry women hurt, shout, break, threaten, as well as blame, more than men, and usually also more than in prime time.

The demography of anger

Characters most likely to express anger are major rather than minor, men rather than women, upscale rather than lower class, whites rather than characters of color, and boys (male children and adolescents) rather than most other age and gender groups.

When angry women become violent, they pay a higher price in victimization than men. To extrapolate the findings to a larger scale, for every 100 angry women who hurt others, 162 angry women get hurt. But for every 100 angry men who hurt others, only 82 angry men get hurt. In other words, women bear a double burden of victimization for their violent anger.

Saturday morning children's programs are more stressful and stereotyped. They not only feature more anger than prime time, but the differences between males and females, whites and blacks, and the age groups also tend to be larger.

The exceptions and extensions are equally revealing. In prime time, young and elderly women are more likely to express anger than young and elderly men. Upscale characters are more often angered than others, but upper class women are especially prone to anger. And angry women in cartoons are more likely to present a threatening criminal, and even lethal, menace than angry men. In fact, the relatively few females playing major roles in Saturday morning children's programs are the angriest group on television. Nearly seven out of ten (68.4 percent) express anger, compared to less than half (49.0 percent) of prime time women.

The script archive analysis suggests that the target of most anger is a stranger in a fleeting relationship. Most anger scenes (59 percent) involve male-to-male power struggles. Only 18 percent are between male and female, and 6 percent among females. Anger is directed at a friend or member of the family in only one-third of the scenes. Eight out of ten anger scenes involve new rather than previously existing issues; half escalate into violence; only one-third alter a relationship at all; and less than one in ten results in improvement.

Expressing anger

Not all anger involves violence and not all violence involves anger, but six out of ten programs (61.6 percent) involve both. Of all anger scenes in prime time, 14.6 percent involve violence. Of the Saturday morning children's program anger scenes, 36.2 percent involve violence. Violence and/or anger occurs in 52.1 percent of prime time and 92.1 percent of Saturday morning children's programs. Male anger is consistently more violent than female anger.

However, most violence on television is "cool" and does not involve anger or perhaps any expression of emotion. Only a little over one-third (34.1 percent) of prime time violence and of one-fourth (27.6 percent) of Saturday morning children's program violence involves expressions of anger.

Other manifestations of anger in prime time range from shouting (82.6 percent), blaming (53.3 percent), insulting (47.1 percent), saying "unfair"

Managing anger

In television drama, unlike perhaps in life, anger is not usually "managed" or "resolved." Only about six out of ten prime time and four out of ten Saturday morning children's program characters even attempt any resolution other than violence or just venting anger. About half of all characters in anger scenes listen to the target of their anger and try to discuss it, or just leave (12.2 percent), or reflect on their own anger (28.2 percent), or find humor in the situation (23.5 percent), or talk to themselves about it (10.2 percent), or the scene just dissolves into some other action. In four or five of all anger scenes, resolution, if any, remains to be suggested by the plot, but not shown.

When controlling or managing anger is allowed to slow the action, it is more likely to be done by women than men. More women listen to the target of their anger, recognize their own anger, and find humor in the situation. The only resolutions angry men exhibit slightly more than women are running away or talking to themselves.

Examples of managing anger include the recognition of one's own anger by apologizing, analyzing angry outbursts, and acknowledging fault. After Mike in "Saved By the Bell" yells at the "guys" for playing poker, he apologizes for his outburst. In a scene in "Murphy Brown", Miles yells at the staff for being uncooperative. Immediately afterwards, he worries aloud about the outburst. Jesse and Joey of the sitcom "Full House," are arguing about what name to give their radio call-in show. After a few minutes of bickering, they admit that their argument is petty and immature.

Talking to one's self is shown as a way of managing anger in the sitcom "Coach" when Kelly is upset because she did not get any job interviews. She talks to herself and tries to rationalize the situation to calm herself down.

Running away as a way of dealing with anger includes both walking out on the unpleasant situation and "running away" from the issue by changing the subject. In the TV movie, "A Child Too Many," a frustrated parent is arguing with an adoption agency representative. In the middle of the argument, the parent walks out of the representative's office. In the sitcom "Family Album," a husband and wife are quarreling when the wife, in order to end the debate, abruptly announces that it is time for bed. In an episode of "The Wonder Years" from the Script Archive, Kevin chides Jeff for his constant sarcasm and Jeff turns on him, angrily: "What are you, Ann Landers? The proper way to do this, the proper way to do that. It's not pretty, y'know." Kevin says "Yeah, forget it," and walks away.

The most frequent way scripts call for managing anger is simply listening to its target and discussing how to deal with it or responding in a positive way. A police officer in "Cops" is talking on the phone with a suspect who refuses to leave his home. The officer calms the angry suspect by explaining why it is in his interest to cooperate. In "The Adventures of Brisco County Jr.," as Brisco and his friend are roped together and stuck in quicksand, they become angry and argue with each other until they come up with an appropriate escape plan. In the same episode of "The Wonder Years," Kevin's father, Jack, is berating him: "Where the hell have you been? ...You

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TABLE 1: PROGRAMS AND SCENES IN WHICH ANGER IS EXPRESSED

	Prime time	Saturday morning	Total
Programs (Total Nos.)	121	38	159
Percent of Programs that have anger scenes (Tot.)	72.7	100.0	79.2
ABC	20	6	26
Percent with viol.	90.0	100.0	92.3
CBS	33	16	49
Percent with viol.	66.7	100.0	77.6
NBC	28	3	31
Percent with viol.	78.6	100.0	80.6
FOX	40	13	53
Percent with viol.	65.0	100.0	73.6
Genre of programs with anger scenes			
Crime, action	17	6	23
Percent with viol.	94.1	100.0	14.5
Western	2	1	3
Percent with viol.	100.0	100.0	1.9
Sitcom	51	21	72
Percent with viol.	84.3	100.0	45.3
Gen. drama	51	10	61
Percent with viol.	52.9	100.0	38.4
Type of program with anger scene			
Fictional	84	38	122
Percent with viol.	89.3	100.0	92.6
"Reality show"	37		37
Percent with viol.	35.1	-	35.1
Total number of anger scenes	724	290	1,014
Percent involving viol.	14.6	36.2	20.8
Total number of violent scenes	396	370	766
Percent involving anger	34.1	27.6	30.8
Percent of programs that contain scenes that involve both viol. & anger	52.1	92.1	61.6

TABLE 2: CHARACTERS EXPRESSING ANGER

	Prime time			Sat. morning			Total		
	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.
Total number of characters	966	506	1496	296	97	430	1262	603	1926
Percent expressing anger	25.1	23.7	24.7	36.1	27.8	31.4	27.1	24.4	25.9
Number of major characters	202	96	298	73	19	92	275	115	390
Percent expressing anger	52.5	49.0	51.3	64.4	68.4	65.2	55.6	52.2	54.6
Number of minor characters	764	410	1198	223	78	338	987	488	1536
Percent expressing anger	17.8	17.8	17.5	26.9	17.9	22.2	19.9	17.8	18.6

TABLE 3: AGE, CLASS AND RACE OF CHARACTERS EXPRESSING ANGER

		Prime time			Sat. morning			Total		
		M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.
SOCIAL AGE										
Child and adol.	N	77	45	122	42	12	54	119	57	176
Expressing anger	%	31.2	28.9	30.3	42.9	33.3	40.7	35.3	29.8	33.5
Young adults	N	215	143	359	71	41	115	286	184	474
Expressing anger	%	20.9	21.7	21.2	22.5	26.8	23.5	21.3	22.8	21.7
Settled adults	N	629	295	925	159	37	198	788	332	1123
Expressing anger	%	26.1	23.7	25.3	42.1	27.0	38.9	29.3	24.1	27.7
Elderly	N	32	22	54	5	1	6	37	23	60
Expressing anger	%	25.0	27.3	25.9	40.0	0.8	33.3	27.0	26.1	26.7
SOCIAL CLASS										
Upper class	N	24	16	40	1	-	1	25	16	41
Expressing anger	%	29.7	43.8	35.0	100.0	-	100.0	32.0	43.8	36.6
Middle class	N	920	482	1415	292	97	425	1212	579	1840
Expressing anger	%	25.1	23.2	24.2	36.0	27.8	31.3	27.7	24.0	25.9
Lower class	N	9	5	14	-	-	-	9	5	14
Expressing anger	%	11.1	0.0	7.1	-	-	-	11.1	0.0	7.1
RACE										
White char.	N	756	412	1168	143	57	200	899	469	1368
Expressing anger	%	25.3	25.7	25.4	41.3	28.1	37.5	27.8	26.0	27.2
Char. of color	N	157	84	241	17	11	28	174	95	269
Expressing anger	%	23.6	15.5	20.7	17.6	9.1	14.3	23.0	14.7	20.1

TABLE 4: ANGER, CRIME, AND VIOLENCE

MAJOR CHARACTERS	Prime time			Sat. morning			Total		
	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.

Who commit crime									
Not angry	10.4	2.0	7.6	3.8	0.0	3.1	9.0	1.8	6.8
Angry	15.1	8.5	13.1	14.9	23.1	16.7	15.0	11.7	14.1

ALL CHARACTERS

Percent of angry
vs non-angry char:

Who commit violence

Non-fatal									
Not angry	11.5	2.6	8.5	36.0	22.9	32.5	16.5	5.7	13.5
Angry	32.2	10.8	25.3	61.7	40.7	57.8	41.3	16.3	34.1
Fatal									
Not angry	1.4	0.5	1.1	0.5	-	0.3	1.2	0.4	1.0
Angry	5.4	3.3	4.7	0.9	3.7	1.5	4.0	3.4	3.8
Total									
Not angry	12.8	3.1	9.6	36.5	22.9	32.9	17.7	6.1	14.4
Angry	37.6	14.2	30.0	62.6	44.4	59.3	45.3	19.7	38.0

Who suffer victimization

Non-fatal									
Not angry	13.5	6.8	11.7	46.6	35.7	41.0	20.4	11.2	17.8
Angry	36.8	17.5	30.3	69.2	37.0	62.2	46.7	21.1	39.0
Fatal									
Not angry	1.5	1.0	1.3	-	1.4	1.0	1.2	1.1	1.3
Angry	5.8	-	4.1	-	-	-	4.0	-	3.0
Total									
Not angry	15.1	7.8	13.1	46.6	37.1	42.0	21.6	12.3	19.0
Angry	42.6	17.5	34.4	69.2	37.0	62.2	50.7	21.1	42.0

TABLE 5: VENTING AND MANAGING ANGER (ANGRY CHARACTERS ONLY)

	Prime time			Sat. morning			Total			
	Total N	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.
Total N	242	120	363	107	27	135	349	147	498	
Venting anger:										
Say "Unfair"	38.0	48.7	41.4	32.7	33.3	32.6	36.4	45.9	39.0	
Blame someone	48.8	62.2	53.3	48.6	70.4	52.6	48.7	63.7	53.1	
Shouting	83.1	81.7	82.6	60.7	77.8	63.7	76.2	81.0	77.5	
Crying	11.2	19.2	13.8	8.4	22.2	11.1	10.3	19.7	13.1	
Hurting	31.0	9.2	23.7	39.3	29.6	37.0	33.5	12.9	27.3	
Breaking, destroying	12.9	2.5	9.4	12.1	14.8	12.6	12.6	4.8	10.3	
Threatening	35.3	24.2	31.8	39.3	44.4	40.0	36.5	27.9	34.0	
Insulting	45.0	50.8	47.1	36.4	33.3	35.6	42.4	47.6	44.0	
Foul Language	14.5	7.5	12.1	0.9	-	0.7	10.3	6.1	9.0	
Any combination of above	97.5	98.3	97.8	87.9	96.3	89.6	94.6	98.0	95.6	
Managing anger:										
Recognizes own anger	27.0	30.8	28.2	21.7	48.1	26.9	25.4	34.0	27.8	
Talks to self	10.8	9.2	10.2	8.5	14.8	9.7	10.1	10.2	10.1	
Runs away	14.0	8.4	12.2	5.6	7.4	5.9	11.5	8.2	10.5	
Listens to target of ang.	46.5	60.0	50.8	24.5	55.6	30.6	39.8	59.2	45.4	
Finds humor in situation	21.2	28.3	23.5	7.5	7.4	7.5	17.0	24.5	19.2	
Any combination of above	56.6	68.3	60.3	35.5	59.3	40.0	50.1	66.7	54.8	