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**ANGER ON TELEVISION**

**A report to the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives**

by

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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 report.

**The analysis**

The study on which this report is based involved the analysis of samples of prime time and Saturday morning children's programs aired on four television networks during the 1993-94 season. (See Appendix for all tabulations.) Only dramatic programs (plays, including action, comedy, general drama, etc.) were included in the samples. The objective was to observe, classify, and record all manifestation of anger in these programs.

Additional information came from the Annenberg School Script Archives, containing scripts of dramatic programs aired on television. Scripts were selected for diversity of topics from the 1990, 1992 and 1993 seasons.

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 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

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.

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.

#### The demography of anger

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

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 are equally revealing. Women, less visible in Saturday morning children's programs than in prime time, are more troubled, violent and angry. Although boys are more likely to project anger than girls, older women in Saturday morning children's programs are more likely to be angry than 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.

The general demographic picture is one of a power structure in which anger is brandished as a weapon or used to stigmatize but results in little change. We now turn to how that occurs.

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

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.

### **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 programs characters attempt any resolution other than violence or other venting of anger. Characters just leave or the scene dissolves into some other action. 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 skill angry men exhibit slightly more than women is talking to themselves.

Saturday morning children's programs feature more anger and even less management than prime time. Most gender gaps are also wider. The major difference is that, despite the ostensibly humorous nature

of cartoons, few men or women find humor in an anger scene. While nearly one fourth (23.5 percent) of prime time characters can find humor in an anger situation, only 7.5 percent of cartoon characters do.

### Conclusions

The television viewer sees expressions of anger in three out of four prime time programs and in all Saturday morning children's programs. Aggregate analysis brings out the more uniform and formulaic features of these programs and obscures the exceptional.

Dramatic formulas prescribe casting and fate rather than describe real-life human behavior. The lessons these formulas and functions may hold for those exposed to them over long periods of time are not matters of simple causation. Fictional stories convey a sense of dynamic relationships: how things work behind the scenes of everyday life, who are the winners and the losers, who can get away with what against whom.

In that sense, anger serves functions of dramatic stress and social typing. It seems to project power and place people into a hierarchy of powers. The management of anger implies weakness or adjustment.

Anger often erupts in new situations and escalates into violence or leads to other disruptions but rarely to change. When the manifestation is over, the scene often shifts without showing other consequences.

The manifestations depend largely on gender, class, age, and race. To oversimplify, men threaten, curse and hurt; women complain, blame, and cry. In Saturday morning children's programs, however, older women present a forbidding "mother image."

Only about half of angry characters, more women than men, use any type of anger management. Saturday morning children's programs do not ameliorate the harsh picture of prime time. On the contrary, they involve even more stress, violence, and stereotyping, and less anger-management.

The potential lessons of this analysis are on three levels:

First, there are lessons for the parent, teacher, and media consultant. (More to come.)

Secondly, viewers as members of communities should insist that schools teach media literacy and critical viewing as core subjects on every level.

Third, the new task of citizenship is to work for greater investment in what is now the primary socialization of our children. That means less formula-driven programming for more specialized needs.

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## APPENDIX

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			
anger scenes	724	290	1,014
Percent involving viol.	14.6	36.2	20.8
Total number of violent scenes			
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 adult	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 adult	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	0.0	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: SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF MAJOR CHARACTERS EXPRESSING ANGER

	Prime time			Sat. morning			Total		
	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.
Percent of angry vs non-angry char:									
Who commits crime									
Not angry	10.4	2.0	7.6	3.8	0.0	3.1	9.0	1.8	6.8
Angry	<u>15.1</u>	8.5	13.1	14.9	<u>23.1</u>	16.7	15.0	11.7	14.1
Who smokes or drinks									
Not angry	9.4	16.3	11.7	-	-	-	7.4	14.5	9.6
Angry	<u>28.3</u>	19.1	25.5	-	-	-	19.6	15.0	18.3

TABLE 5: ANGER AND VIOLENCE (ALL CHARACTERS)

	Prime time			Sat. morning			Total		
	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.
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	<u>32.2</u>	10.8	25.3	<u>61.7</u>	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	<u>5.4</u>	3.3	4.7	0.9	<u>3.7</u>	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	<u>37.6</u>	14.2	30.0	<u>62.6</u>	44.4	59.3	<u>45.3</u>	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	<u>36.8</u>	17.5	30.3	<u>69.2</u>	37.0	62.2	<u>46.7</u>	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	<u>42.6</u>	17.5	34.4	69.2	37.0	62.2	50.7	21.1	42.0

87 over

376  
426

Man 100  
women 162  
87

TABLE 6: VENTING AND MANAGING ANGER (ANGRY CHARACTERS ONLY)

	Prime time			Sat. morning			Total		
	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