

HISTORICAL AND CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON ANGER

By Hope Harmeling-Benne

In a 1984 bestseller, The Rage Within: Anger in Modern Life, Willard Gaylin, MD asserted that anger is the dominant emotion in American life today. He stated threats, verbal abuse, lawsuits, and physical violence are pervasive and concluded “We are tolerating more brutality than is wise and legitimizing more selfishness than is safe.” We all realize anger is expressed in rap, hip hop, and heavy metal music, in movies, on TV and on roadways, in sport and politics, and even in children’s cartoons where on the Ren and Stimpy show Ren said “I love getting angry. It makes me feel great.”

An understanding of anger in America today must begin with the realization that anger has often been justified and freely and publicly expressed throughout American history. Beginning with our ancestors’ desire to leave Europe to escape oppression, to the struggle for independence from Britain, to the righteous indignation over slavery, Americans have expressed anger. And with glorification of personal freedom and individual expression as among the highest American values, there has been a tolerance of anger. Furthermore, because it is a highly individualistic culture, social responsibility is placed in the hands of each individual. Each person and each family has had to decide how to manage anger.

These facts about American anger are well-known to us. Now, because many observers do feel anger is a dominant emotion in America, I wish to explore a deeper understanding of anger.

There are some generally agreed upon facts and theories about emotions. Emotions are biologically based and genetically-encoded, coordinated by a gland in the limbic region of the brain, the amygdale. The feelings that are internally experienced by each person such as love, grief, fear and anger are also locally, culturally, and contextually constructed. Therefore, emotions shape and are shaped by culture. Furthermore, in every culture some emotions are prized and honored and others are considered destructive and disruptive. A culture may encourage or discourage anger, fear, grief, or gratitude. The extent to which a culture encourages or discourages an

emotion will reflect the culture's moral interests, values, judgments and visions.

Because each person's feelings are internally experienced, we know about their feelings through language. People tell us if they're sad or happy. Language is crucial in the study of emotions. Words for the emotions have to be carefully understood within a cultural group and also across cultures. The experience of anger may not be shared equally by all members of a cultural group. Levels of intensity could be gender-determined or class-determined.

Words for anger in various cultures could be placed on a spectrum with mild forms for anger such as annoyance, frustration, and irritation on one end and moral indignation, wrath, fury, and rage on the other end. The stronger forms of anger involve the potential for violence. and desire for revenge. People sometimes act out of such intense anger that they lose consciousness and black out psychologically.

If views of anger are shaped by the culture, then it is beneficial to study how various cultures have expressed anger and understand whether it is accepted and encouraged or admonished and restrained. In this way, through comparative analysis, we can learn about a whole range of ideas regarding anger. For example the Malay word for anger means offended, the Ifaluk word for anger means righteous indignation and the Webster's Dictionary definition of the English meaning of anger is: a feeling of great displeasure, hostility, indignation or exasperation. The English word for anger therefore implies someone else is to blame and it implies strong feelings of good and evil, right and wrong. So anger quickly becomes moral indignation and we sue. This leads us to ask: Is anger intensified by strong concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, or shame and blame in a culture?

To discuss historical and cross-cultural perspectives on anger, I have divided this presentation into discussion of three heritages: the Judeo-Christian heritage, the Sino-Buddhist heritage and two small cultures, one south sea island and one Eskimo. A comparison of these heritages will yield useful insights into anger.

Early Greek and Roman dramatists, historians, poets and philosophers who reflected on anger saw it as a source of disruption and disturbance. In a recent book titled "Restraining Rage: the Ideology of Anger Control in

Classical Antiquity” author William Harris draws together a range of texts and explores ancient classical writers ideas on anger control and why they advocated restraint or even elimination of anger. The written discourse on anger control began with Homer and Hesiod. These storytellers often reckoned with the damaging effects of anger. The first line of the Iliad gets the epic started “Wrath – Goddess sing the wrath of Peleus’ son Achilles – that cost the Achaeans countless losses hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls.” All throughout the epic Homer discusses anger because both gods and men indulged in it. He counsels restraint of anger when he puts these words of regret into Hector’s mouth “I wish strife would disappear from among Gods and men and also anger, which makes even wise men get into an evil temper. I’ll say that Agamemnon, King of men, made me angry. However, what is done is better left alone, though we resent it still, and we must by force curb the dear passion in our breast.” As time went on the discourse about anger restraint became more intense, heated and elaborated. Historians Herodotus and Thucydides both condemned anger saying it inhibits reason and harms relationships. Both attributed enormous value to leaders and citizens who controlled their rage. Plato and Aristotle thought anger was a “sickness of the soul.” Aristotle thought ‘those who don’t show righteous anger are regarded as fools, but they must show anger in the right way at the right time and at the right person.”

Epicurians and Stoics alike conducted discourses on anger. Epicurians were anger moderates who held excessive anger was negative, but conceded some anger was necessary to stimulate passion and motivation. Stoics were anger absolutists – categorically opposed to anger. They felt people should subordinate all emotions to reason.

Seneca, the Roman writer, said “Anger as a desire for avenging injury cost the human race more than any plague.” And Cicero said “To govern one’s mind and speech when angry is a mark of a great ability.”

I think it is very interesting that the book I read is called Restraining Rage: the Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity with ideology meaning a whole thought system. In fact how the emotions are viewed and expressed amounts to special ideologies in each culture of how social relationships should be handled.

The Old and New Testaments also had numerous references to anger. Moses who experienced various levels of anger – indignation, wrath, fury, and rage - to the point it cost him from entering the Promised Land. Jesus displayed anger once when he overthrew the money-changers who were robbing the poor. But in general the Bible makes it clear that “anger rests in the bosom of a fool” and says “do not let the sun go down on your anger.” As Christians constructed notions of anger, anger became associated with righteous indignation and in certain justified instances it could be expressed, but fury and rage which could lead to violence and desire for revenge were condemned.

Keeping in mind that tolerance of anger shifted from era to era and culture to culture within the overall Judeo-Christian heritage there has been enormous ambiguity about emotions. Among scholars it was thought that reason was superior to the emotions, that thinking was superior to feeling, and that dispassion was superior to passion. It was thought people were at the “mercy of their emotions,” or “eaten away” by emotions or “blinded” by emotions. It was thought emotions couldn’t be controlled and they were therefore suspect. These dichotomies, assumptions and biases are fundamental to the western worldview.

I do not think we are at the mercy of our emotions and I now wish to provide some examples of how anger is viewed and expressed in the Sino-Buddhist cultures of Asia.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism have all sought to establish proper human conduct which will result in a better life on earth. The Chinese view of human beings is that we are social and have to live together. Confucianism incorporates 5 sacred relationships- wife obeys husband, children obey parents, people obey emperor. In addition, they believe in a universal human quality called jen which means benevolence, human heartedness, and sympathy. It implies a shared humanity and a desire to help others. The Chinese have many codes of law, but this quality of sympathy, jen, must enter into each legal decision.

Taoism stresses a natural, spontaneous life free from artificial constraints in conformity with the ways of nature. But Taoists also believe in being thoughtful of others and promoting harmony in the group.

Buddhists entered China in 300's AD and emphasized that all suffering is caused by excessive desire and ego. They taught that through meditation people could overcome desire and ego, transform their understanding of life, and achieve intellectual clarity and the right conception of the world. Buddhists are supposed to avoid negative emotions and encourage positive emotions. In this way they curb desire and competition and think of the welfare of others.

Buddhists see the emotions as minor disruptions in a person's overall life. They aim to reach Nirvana which is the eternal oneness of everything in the cosmos, and they see the whole of life as a passage over a calm and boundless ocean. They accept hardships in a fatalistic way thinking they were meant to be. They have conceptions of the body such as that the emotions are in the charkas which are in the noncorporeal body. They see negative emotions as disorders coming from excessive desire.

In Buddhism the faithful who reach the highest rank reject artificial barriers which divide one person from another. They have awakened to the tragedy and human suffering in this world.

In the case of negative emotions like anger, Buddhists feel one can make friends with anger and therefore become liberated from this negative emotion. Thich Nhat Hanh has recently written a book titled Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames in which he teaches how to overcome anger through meditation, mindful breathing, deep listening, and compassion. There is no ambiguity over anger in his work. It is assumed that anger is negative and we should never act out of angry feelings.

The positive moral legacy of these Sino-Buddhist beliefs is something Americans can learn from. Aiming to please and live harmoniously with each other, their traditional philosophy of life encourages them to work to cultivate good behavior and positive emotion and eliminate thoughtless and coarse behavior. Starting with the holistic awareness that life is full of contradictions, they can see the good and bad in both sides, and are ready to compromise. They are less aggressive, less competitive, and more tolerant. They do not blame quickly because they aim to maintain good relationships. While they have sometimes violated their own best standards and ideals, their societies are still governed by the good relationships in a network of relatives and friends. Traditionally they do not make quick judgments because they try to take time to understand the other points of view. Their

tradition is not ambiguous, so there is little emotional ambiguity for them; their goal is good relationships and they are geared to maintaining them.

Two books I read, one called Unnatural Emotions by Catherine Lutz is about the Ifaluk Islanders of the South Pacific and the other called, Never in Anger, by Jean Biggs about the Utku Eskimos in the Arctic Circle in Northern Canada are illustrative of close knit kinship cultures where anger is greatly restrained. These cultures place a premium on communal harmony. They see the individual as part of the group and part of the relationships in the group and not as someone with individual rights. Sharing behavior is greatly valued and people try to help and please each other by behaving calm and thoughtful.

The Ifaluk differentiate between anger as minor personal frustration and anger as righteous indignation. The fact that they differentiate between these two types of anger gives them a large degree of emotional clarity concerning anger and when and how to express it. When they experience minor personal frustrations, they are supposed to make a joke about it. But when a person uses the word for righteous indignation, “song,” this sets off a huge discussion in the group on the reasons for this anger and then they pursue many ways to resolve the issue within the group. People use “song” when a taboo has been violated and taboos include taking marine resources out of season, entering sacred areas of the island, and women riding canoes during fishing trips.

CONCLUSION

Americans can learn much from traditional Sino-Buddhist, south sea islanders, the Ifaluk and Utku Eskimos’ views of anger. Amidst their efforts to create good feelings and good relationships, these people rarely express anger. They express joy, happiness, forbearance, and compassion and restrain negative emotions.

The history of humankind shows that advances of culture depend on opportunities presented to social groups to learn from the experiences of their neighbors. We are the creators of our future. Our biology is not an imperative. We have it within our hands to modify and change our cultures. In today’s global world all the world’s peoples are our neighbors and we have a lot to learn from them about anger.