Sixty women’s narratives about their anger were coded for elements of anger expression. Their decisions regarding how and where to express anger are most strongly influenced by the anticipated reactions of others. Six patterns of bringing anger into relationships or keeping it out were identified. Women bring anger into relationship: (1) positively and directly, with the goal of removing barriers to relationship; (2) aggressively, with the goal of hurting another; and (3) indirectly, through disguising anger with the goal of remaining safe from interpersonal consequences, using strategies of (a) quiet sabotage, (b) hostile distance, (c) deflection, and (d) loss of control. Women keep anger out of relationship (1) consciously and constructively, choosing to express it in positive ways; (2) explosively expressing anger, but not in the presence of another; and (3) through self-silencing, which ranges from conscious to less-conscious awareness of anger and its suppression. Implications of differing patterns for women’s health are discussed.

The way women express or suppress their anger has been linked to health consequences, such as depression (Jack, 1991, 1999b), hypertension and cardiovascular disease (Faber & Burns, 1996; Muller, Rau, Brody, Elbert, & Heinle, 1995), irritable bowel disease (Ali et al., 2000),...
and suicide (Van Elderen, Verkes, Arkesteijn, & Komproe, 1996). To understand the relation of women’s anger to their health, it is critical that research accurately and precisely identify which elements of anger expression do, in fact, impact women’s mental and physical well-being.

Researchers commonly rely on the concepts of internalization or externalization as the most critical elements of anger expression that affect health outcomes. In three anger scales—the Anger Expression Scale (AX Scale; Spielberger et al., 1985), the Self-Expression and Control Scale (Van Elderen et al., 1996), and Harburg’s Anger-In/Anger-Out Scale (Harburg et al., 1973)—externalization (anger-out) usually refers to responses that are overtly expressed, whereas internalization (anger-in) represents all reactions that are not outwardly directed. Yet significant conceptual problems exist with the concepts of externalization and internalization as now represented in anger scales. For example, in Spielberger and colleagues (1985) AX Scale, widely used by investigators, the dimension of anger-out contains items depicting anger that is expressed in overt verbal and physical behaviors, such as, “I strike out at whatever infuriates me,” without discriminating between actions directed at persons or objects. Such lack of discrimination regarding the interpersonal context of angry actions creates confusing ambiguity. For example, the item, “I do things like slam doors” falls under the anger-out dimension of the AX Scale (Spielberger et al., 1985). Yet this action carries radically different meanings and consequences, depending on whether a person slams the door in someone’s face or slams it in an empty house. Interpersonal contexts, which determine the meaning that subjects attribute to seemingly context-free actions described in anger scales, are not taken into account. In a study that demonstrates the problems with this scale, Martin and Watson (1997) asked 49 college women to complete the AX Scale (Spielberger et al., 1985) as well as 7 diary entries per day for 8 days. Subjects noted on each entry the occurrence of problems and anger episodes, the expression of any anger, and a rating of their current mood. They found that diary reports of women’s anger expression were unrelated to participants’ anger-out scores on the AX Scale.

The internalization (anger-in) dimension of anger scales is also problematic. The anger-in items are intended to assess not only an experience of anger that is not communicated to others (for example, “I boil inside but don’t show it”), but also assess individual differences in the experience of negative affect that include, but are not confined to, anger (for example, “I withdraw from people,” “I pout or sulk,” “I keep things in”) (Martin & Watson, 1997). Although these items are designed to assess anger that is not communicated to others, the behaviors of pouting, sulking, and withdrawal work as powerful interpersonal communications and create interpersonal effects.
Further, findings regarding how these styles of anger expression associate with specific negative health outcomes are complex and contradictory. For example, some studies suggest that the externalization, or outward expression of anger, reflected in type A and other hostile behaviors, is associated with the development of coronary heart disease (Matthews, Glass, Rosenman, & Bortner, 1977) and depression (Berkowitz, 1990; Jack, 1999a). Other studies conclude that the internalization, or suppression, of anger increases the risk of hypertension and coronary heart disease (Spielberger et al., 1985) and of negative health effects such as depression and anxiety (Bageley, 1979; Bridewell & Chang, 1997; Cox, Stabb, & Bruckner, 1999; Droppelman, Thomas, & Wilt, 1995; Jansen & Muenz, 1984; Nyhlin et al., 1993; Pennebaker, 1989; Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). These inconsistent results suggest that there may be elements of anger expression other than internalization and externalization that are equally or more important in determining the impact of anger on women’s health.

My previous research on women’s depression and aggression suggests that the most critical factor affecting anger’s arousal and expression is the interpersonal context (Jack, 1991, 1999a, 1999b). Other studies find that women’s anger is more likely to result from another’s actions within a close relationship, whereas men are more likely to be angered by the actions of strangers (Fehr, 1996; Lohr, Hamberger, & Bonge, 1988; Thomas, 1993). Fehr and colleagues (1999), in a study of university undergraduates exploring interpersonal scripts for anger in close relationships, found that women reacted to interpersonal events with more anger. They surmise that “women’s greater propensity to be angered in these contexts may reflect their greater sensitivity to the quality of their close relationships and their greater motivation to achieve intimacy in these relationships as well as, perhaps, their reported greater tendency to derive self-esteem from close relationships” (cites omitted, p. 308). Thomas (2000) and Jack (2000) also report that women describe their anger primarily in relational terms, placing their anger squarely in stories about relationships and focusing on the interpersonal origins, expression, and effects of their anger.

The most commonly used anger scales slight the interpersonal context of anger’s origins and effects and ignore major determinants that affect anger’s expression or suppression, such as power, fear, and cultural norms governing gender-appropriate expression (see also Baldwin, 1995; Fehr, Baldwin, Collins, Patterson, & Benditt, 1999; Jack, 1991, 1999b). Anger scales consider the interpersonal context primarily to determine if it stimulates anger and measure an individual’s amount of tendency to respond (Novaco, 1975), or assess whether the individual directs anger outward or inward (Spielberger et al., 1985), or assess an individual’s likelihood for anger proneness (Van Goozen, Frijda, & Van de Poll, 1994). Thus,
externalization or internalization, the most widely used dichotomy in the measurement of anger, emphasizes the escape or containment of anger within the individual, considering the interpersonal context only for its anger stimulus value.

To discover what elements of anger expression women identify as most important in their experience, I undertook a qualitative, descriptive study of 60 women that inquired into their experience of anger in daily life. Such a study may provide the basis for instrument development specifically related to women’s experience. Later investigations may reveal how and whether those patterns of anger expression are associated with specific health outcomes in differing samples of women.

METHOD

Sample

The data for this descriptive analysis consist of semistructured interviews that inquired about the expression of anger and aggression in everyday life in a sample of 60 women (Jack, 1999a, 1999c). To include a range of social expectations regarding women’s expression of anger as well as varying degrees of their social power, I interviewed women selected from the following contexts: politicians, administrators, attorneys, police officers, social workers, teachers, college students, homeless women, legal secretaries, and substance abusers. The 41 White women and 19 women of color ranged in age from 17 to 75 (mean 36), and included 8 lesbians. Thirty-six had been abused as children, as adults, or both. Interviews lasted an average of 2 hours; eleven women were interviewed twice; four were interviewed 3 times.

Procedures

The 60 interviews were transcribed verbatim. Ethnograph software was used to code transcribed interviews; “nesting” of codes allows a narrative segment to be marked with multiple codes. Each interview was first coded for anger segments in the narrative by two coders, the author and a graduate student, working independently. Segments coded “anger” were then printed out across all the interviews without any identifying subject information. Two additional student coders were assigned the task of coding the anger segments for dimensions of externalization, internalization, and control of anger as currently conceptualized by anger measures. Utilizing grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I sought to determine if these existing categories adequately represented women’s
narratives of their anger, and, if not, to discover what elements women themselves identified as most important in their experience and expression of anger.

The lack of fit between the categories of internalization and externalization and the women’s self-reports became obvious after coders considered only 10 of the 60 subjects’ anger narratives. The following example illustrates the lack of fit. A White woman, age 32, who was a secretary, described how she was angered by her partner’s response to her request that he help out more with housework. She feared showing her anger to him, saying, “He would just get really angry about it and would probably start doing even less than he does now.” To deal with her feelings, she got into her car, drove away, and only then, “cried, yelled, and pounded on the steering wheel.” Further, this woman described that her anger over the incident continued to be incited through her partner’s refusal to change patterns of housework, yet she did not communicate her anger directly to him. Coding the steering wheel incident as “externalization” did not reflect the focus of her concern: If she directly stated her anger (brought it into relationship in a clear, direct manner), her anger would result in negative interpersonal effects. If she kept it out of relationship through pounding the steering wheel out of her partner’s presence, she believed that her anger would not carry negative relational consequences.

A new coding scheme was devised, based on the insights gained through the misfit of categories currently utilized by anger scales to the 10 women’s representations about their anger experiences. The focus of analysis was shifted from the individual as a “container” of anger (whether anger is externalized, internalized, or controlled) to the relationship, and to whether the woman brings her anger into relationship or keeps it out. Such a coding scheme that emerged from systematic consideration of data, that has been corrected and informed by the data, and that is then reapplied systematically to all data follows the assumptions and methods of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Instructed by the women’s emphasis on whether they express anger in relationships and on how they express it, we reprinted anger narrative segments and then coded following the categories below:

1. Is anger brought into the relationship?
   a. How (using what behaviors)?
   b. Why was it brought into relationships (goal of anger, anticipated responses from other)?
2. Is anger kept out of the relationship?
   a. How (using what behaviors)?
   b. Why was it kept out of relationship (purpose of keeping anger out of relationship, anticipated responses from other)?
3. What were the woman’s feelings about her anger (self-judgments and conflicts, connection or disconnection from her own anger)?
4. What were the woman’s descriptions of outcomes of anger episodes (on relationship, on self, and on other)?

RESULTS

Results of coding reveal that how women expect others to react to their anger is the most important determinant of how they express that anger. Ninety-eight percent of their narrative segments about anger discussed the interpersonal aspects of their anger, with the focus of discussion on the anticipated reactions of others. Women identify whether their anger is brought into or kept out of relationship as the most critical issue regarding their anger expression. However, the simple dichotomy of whether a woman brings anger into relationship or keeps it out does not reflect the complexity of women’s anger expression. From women’s self-reports, what appears to affect their well-being most strongly is (1) How the patterns of behavior a woman uses to bring anger in or keep it out of relationship affect her interpersonal experience and experience of self; and (2) How the patterns of behaviors women used to bring anger into relationship or keep it out affect the ongoing incitement and experience of their anger. The coding schema revealed 6 major relational patterns of women’s anger: three that reflect the ways women bring anger into relationships, and three that reflect the ways women keep anger out of relationship. Below I present the patterns with illustrative examples.

**Bringing Anger into Relationship**

(1) Positively and directly. Women state that the goal of their clear, direct anger expression is to remove barriers to closeness or to right an inequity or violation within a relationship, or both. For example, a teacher, age 39, White, was angry that her husband refused to listen to her ideas regarding remodeling their house. The pattern of his refusal to listen and of her feelings of powerlessness continually incited her anger and led her to distance herself from her husband. She described directly confronting him with her anger and the inequity she felt, and they resolved the situation by including her ideas into the house design. She reported feeling empowered and positive about expressing her anger and about its effect on the relationship.

Bringing anger into a relationship positively and directly fulfills anger’s functional goals, which are to “clear the air” and to regulate social relationships by rectifying a problem, especially a violation, within a relationship through constructive dialogue (Averill, 1982; Bowlby, 1973). In John Bowlby’s (1973) view, anger is aroused in response to disconnec-
tation or obstacles in relationship; the “anger of hope” requires the beliefs that one can communicate and be heard and that anger and conflict can have positive benefits to relationships. This “assertiveness,” or positive expression of angry feeling, answers anger’s call to action (Averill, 1982). Mikulincer (1998) found that people who are securely attached are able to see their anger as a way to remove barriers to relationship and are able to bring anger into positive dialogue. However, women’s narratives make clear that their ability to express anger positively relates not only to feeling securely attached, but also to a relative equality in social hierarchy with the people with whom they are angry. They also describe positive self-regard and a sense of well-being from bringing anger into relationship directly, particularly when doing so carries positive interpersonal effects.

(2) Aggressively. In using this pattern of anger expression, women state that their goal is to hurt someone, to displace someone, or to retaliate. In women’s examples, aggressive anger expression ranged from verbal to physical assaults. In bringing anger into relationship aggressively, the woman does not seek dialogue and resolution. Rather, the anger grows out of the experience of disconnection; enacting it aggressively furthers the relational disconnection. For example, an artist, age 34, White, was living with a man who decided to end the relationship. On his way out the door, he informed her that he was moving in with someone else. She described a number of aggressive actions she took against him, including wrestling with him to stop his leaving, hitting him, and attempting to intercept him and his new girlfriend. In her words, “Three separate times I hit him. I slapped him in the face. . . . It was just pure heat, pure fury. I have gotten that feeling with him often enough. I wanted to hurt him. I really wanted to hurt him. I wanted to take away any sense of well-being he had about his actions.”

The “anger of despair,” in Bowlby’s (1973) terms, leads to aggression and often arises from a feeling of being powerless to restore relationship, or when hostility over separation has replaced the bonds of attachment. Women’s self-reports make clear that this pattern of anger expression is rarely associated with a sense of well-being and that often it has been learned through childhood experience in a violent or abusive family. (See Jack, 1999a, for a detailed examination of women’s aggression resulting from an anger of despair.)

(3) Indirectly, through masking anger. In this pattern of anger expression, women describe that their goal is to bring anger into relationship but keep it disguised and out of dialogue. The indirection allows a woman to deny her anger when confronted, and thus attempt to avoid retaliation or other negative interpersonal consequences. Women who give examples of indirect anger expression are aware of disguising their anger and report
doing so to avoid negative interpersonal consequences, or because they had learned this pattern of behavior within their families. They rarely report positive feelings from expressing anger indirectly, and describe, instead, guilt, diminished self-esteem, and continuing anger over interpersonal situations that arouse the anger.

Although ways of masking anger are as varied as the human imagination, four patterns, or strategies, for safe expression of anger were identified through coding. Each strategy is guided by a belief that the direct expression of anger holds dangerous consequences, or is forbidden by gender norms; each strategy involves bringing anger into relationship indirectly and keeping it out of positive dialogue.

(a) *Quiet sabotage*. Women report that, when angry, they create the appearance of not being angry to conform to gender expectations regarding women’s behavior, or to remain safe in a dangerous relationship. Yet, on another level, they resist these restrictions on their anger, using sabotaging behaviors such as “forgetting” to do what is requested, acquiescing to requests then refusing to enact them, or using a variety of behaviors that sabotage the other person’s expectations. This way of communicating anger creates relational impasses as the anger remains “invisible” and disavowed. It includes behaviors women often labeled “passive aggressive” in their own descriptions of their behavior. For example, a White social worker, age 24, was angered by her husband’s habit of giving her lists of things to do as he left for work. Instead of confronting the problem directly, she reported that her practice was to acquiesce, take the list, and either “forget” it, or get the wrong things, or basically to subvert what appeared to be her compliance. She described feeling “lousy” about her way of dealing with her anger, and described negative interpersonal consequences resulting from her inability to directly deal with her anger and with the situation that was creating that anger.

(b) *Hostile distance*. Women frequently use hostile silence to convey anger but at the same time to cut off communication. Behaviors such as withdrawal, pouting or sulking, or “shorten[ing] my sentences,” as well as numerous others, are used to bring anger into the relationship indirectly. The distance is intended to convey angry displeasure to the other while it allows the woman, if confronted, to deny her anger and to avoid interpersonal consequences. For example, a 38-year-old White teacher, married with two children, conveys feelings of anger by “Rattling the dishes around, making comments under my breath that nobody can hear—but they can hear. They can’t hear why I’m saying, but they can hear *me*.”

Women generally report a lack of positive feelings about this pattern of bringing anger into relationship indirectly. For example, the woman above states, “If I say things and my family hears it, I can pretend I didn’t
say it. And instead of figuring out what’s really bothering me and talking about that, or knowing what’s really bothering me and really being afraid to talk about that because it’s either going to cause a fight with him or it’s about me and there’s nothing to do about it. . . . It’s not like I can stop it, because it’s a safe outlet right now.” At times, however, leaking anger into the relationship indirectly allows women to maintain some sense of active resistance when outward expression seems too dangerous, such as in abusive relationships. As with all patterns of women’s anger expression, the relational context powerfully affects its meaning for her self-experience.

(c) *Deflection.* Women report a well-known pattern of bringing their anger into a relationship different from the one in which it arose. Such behavior often is affected by power and fear, and occurs, for example, when a woman redirects the anger elicited by her intimate partner and takes it out on her children. Or, for example, an African American police officer, age 38, was angered at work by her superior’s abusive behavior and as a result became furious at her partner that evening. As well, women described using themselves as the target of anger when they are angry with another person but afraid to express the anger directly. For example, a tai chi teacher, age 44, White, reported ongoing disagreements with her husband about numerous issues that rarely were resolved. She said, “I hit myself and bite myself in front of him to show him (husband) how angry and frustrated I am.” Rather than using the anger that arose out of their disagreements to positively address the issues, she deflected her extreme anger from him to herself. The visible anger has a relational effect, but choosing oneself as a target is much safer than bringing the anger directly into the relationship. A woman may be unaware of switching targets when she chooses herself as the object of her anger, an anger that arose in response to someone else’s devaluing treatment of her. Like other strategies of indirect behavior, deflecting anger from one relationship to another rarely feels empowering or positive according to women’s descriptions of anger outcomes.

(d) *Loss of control.* Women describe being “out of control” through statements such as, “I had PMS,” “I lost it,” “I didn’t mean to,” when they disclaim ownership of their anger. In this pattern of bringing anger into relationship indirectly, a woman disavows responsibility for her anger and does not openly discuss the interpersonal reasons for its arousal. Explosive anger displays such as slamming doors, throwing objects, and yelling, not at another person, but in the presence of another, fall under this strategy of indirect anger expression. For example, a White therapist, age 43, reported that she was furious with her partner but would not confront the issue directly because of fear that she [partner] would escalate with violence. Instead, she entered the apartment, slammed doors, turned
up the stereo as loud as possible, and blamed her actions on PMS. In this way, she could leak anger into the relationship, affect her partner, and deny responsibility for her behavior, all without directly dealing with the interpersonal difficulties that she feared would cause an escalation of her partner’s anger. Although this woman was aware of her actions, often women seem unaware of attempting to control others or the relationship through such behaviors. Because the indirect expression of anger does not resolve the interpersonal situation that elicits the anger, women rarely report feeling positive about angry, explosive behaviors that they attribute to a nonrelational cause.

Women also describe their angry tears as a form of “losing it,” that is, of losing self-control. Tears allow women to bring anger into relationship indirectly through what appears to be a loss of self-control, and, when fearful of negative interpersonal consequences, to attribute those tears to causes other than anger, such as hurt. As a socialized, behavioral display of women’s anger, tears offer a solution to the puzzle of how bring anger into relationship in ways that do not threaten the other person and provide a safe means to express anger without violating social norms regarding how women “should” behave interpersonally in a nondominant manner.

Keeping Anger out of Relationship

(1) Consciously and constructively. In these instances, women felt a clear choice of whether to express anger, and chose to do so outside of the relationship. Although keeping anger out of the relationship, the woman is aware of feeling angry, and can use the anger to set constructive goals and take positive action (see also Hurtado, 1996). For example, a White 34-year-old, on welfare and the mother of two children, was abused in a relationship that she recently escaped. She describes using the anger aroused by the abuse to take positive action by “going down to the courthouse to get a protection order.” Keeping anger out of the relationship in which it was aroused and redirecting it into positive action is a functional and prosocial use of anger that is also self-protective. The overt expression of anger can put women at risk physically and economically; this pattern of positively enacting the anger chooses to do so in safe settings. Women report feeling positive about using their anger to set goals and take positive actions outside of the relationship within which the anger arose.

(2) Explosively but alone. Women describe how they release anger through various ways—yelling, pounding objects, slamming doors, crying—but out of anyone’s presence. For example, a White lesbian, age 40, who is a student, says, “I’ve never been angry in anyone’s presence…. In the past, when I’ve been really, really angry, I’ll go out and get a stick and beat the weeds, or I’d pound something or I’d do
something. I got a drum set and played that, and that was great, loud noise, hit things. Or I’d been on a motorcycle and going down the highway and have the helmet on and just yell at the top of my voice because nobody could hear. Once or twice I’ve done that in a car, but never around anyone else, not ever around anyone else.”

The factor that keeps this and other women’s explosive anger release out of relationship is fear of others’ responses. As well, some women report that they have internalized so deeply the prohibition against women’s anger that they can express anger only in isolation. Such a blanket restriction on what aspects of feeling may be expressed within relationship limits anger’s positive function: to “clear the air” and to regulate social relationships to keep them fair and balanced. Women who follow this pattern describe their frustration with their inability to express anger to others. Whether the ability to express anger in such a form (outside relationship) serves as a coping skill that offsets the known risks of blanket anger suppression needs to be investigated more fully (see Bohart, 1980; Faber & Burns, 1996).

(3) Self-silencing. Self-silencing refers to the behavior of keeping anger out of the relationship through literally stopping its direct and/or indirect expression within relationship, and through presenting an outward appearance of compliance, “happiness,” and lack of anger. It ranges from conscious to less-conscious awareness of anger and its exclusion from relationships and/or from oneself. Self-silencing is guided by images of relatedness measured by the Silencing the Self Scale (Jack & Dill, 1992). These images contain standards that relate to goodness and that judge the feeling and expression of anger as “selfish,” and “bad,” or as dangerous to relationship. The cognitive acts and gender training that creates self-silencing have been described in detail elsewhere (Jack, 1991, 1999b).

Statements such as “I just sit there, by myself, and steam about things,” reveal a woman’s connection with her own feeling but her exclusion of anger from relationship. Or, when a depressed, 58-year-old White woman said, “I’ve never told anyone else that I was angry with them; I don’t allow myself to feel angry,” she disconnects from her own experience of anger as a way to keep it out of relationship. This woman, who recently had suffered a heart attack and had high blood pressure, described feeling particularly anxious the preceding week. She did not know what was affecting her feelings. As she continued talking, she mentioned that her husband, who had divorced her and immediately remarried, intended to come to her home and go through the family album to take what pictures he wanted. He also wanted to introduce her to his new wife. When it was suggested that she might be feeling angry, she said, “I never get angry, I always try to be good.” She was cognitively disconnected from her anger until discussing it with a close friend. This type of self-silencing
has been found to be associated with women’s depression by a number of investigators (Ali et al., 2000; Brazaitis, 1995; Carr, Gilroy, & Sherman, 1996; Duarte & Thompson, 1999; Gratch, Bassett, & Attra, 1995; Jack, 1991, 1999b; Jack & Dill, 1992; Page, Stevens, & Galvin, 1996; Penza, Reiss, & Scott, 1997, Thompson, 1995; Whisman, Uebelacker, & Courtnage, 1997).

DISCUSSION

Women’s narratives of their everyday experience of anger reveal six patterns of anger expression focused on whether they bring anger into relationships or keep it out. They reveal that the decision of how and where to express anger is most strongly influenced by the anticipated reactions of others. Women bring anger into relationship: (1) positively and directly; (2) aggressively; and (3) indirectly, through strategies of (a) quiet sabotage, (b) hostile distance, (c) deflection, and (d) loss of control. They keep anger out of relationship (4) consciously and constructively; (5) explosively but alone; and (6) through self-silencing.

Women’s self-reports indicate that bringing anger into relationship positively and directly results in feelings of well-being, empowerment, and self-regard, particularly when the anger expression carries positive interpersonal results. When women bring anger into the relationship indirectly because of fear of consequences or socialization, they do not address the situation that causes the anger. For the most part, they report experiencing the continued incitement of anger as well as feelings of powerlessness and shame (see also Tagnay, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). When women bring anger into relationship aggressively with the goal of hurting another, their self-judgment is usually negative regarding such actions.

When anger is kept out of the relationship through choosing to express it in constructive ways and in safe settings, women describe positive feelings about their anger as a stimulus for action. Keeping anger out of the relationship through self-silencing has been found to carry negative health consequences, such as depression (Duarte & Thompson, 1999; Gratch et al., 1995; Jack, 1991, 1999b; Jack & Dill, 1992; Page et al., 1996; Penza et al., 1997, Thompson, 1995; Whisman et al., 1997), eating disorders (Cawood, 1998), and irritable bowel syndrome (Ali et al., 2000). Finally, women describe the pattern of expressing anger alone, out of others’ presence, as having both positive and negative effects.

The association of the first pattern with positive self-regard and feelings of well-being was also found by James Averill (1982). A majority of 523 respondents from a community sample and from university samples
(whose ethnicity was unidentified) believed their anger was more beneficial than harmful, by a ratio of 2.5 to 1. Seventy percent indicated that expressing anger helped improve the relational situation. Not surprisingly, the most commonly reported target of anger was a friend, acquaintance, or loved one. Further, 62% of the women said that they “somewhat” or “very much” felt a desire to talk the incident over with the person who instigated the anger; 40% of the men said the same thing.

However, women often experience themselves in a bind regarding their anger expression. Social rules allow those with more social power and dominance to more openly display their anger than those who are less powerful. Following the hierarchy of gender in our society, men have much more permission than women to show anger, both publicly and privately; women have less freedom to overtly express anger, and more often fear reprisal after showing their anger, than do men. Economic inequality and violence reinforce the prohibitions against women’s anger. Further, the negative effect of gender training that reinforces silencing anger rather than using it positively and creatively appears strongly in women’s interviews.

How and if these relational patterns of anger expression are associated with women’s specific health problems needs further systematic investigation. Identification of these elements of anger expression as crucial in their self-experience also lays the basis for instrument development based on women’s everyday experiences of their anger.

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