

In Defense of anger: A misunderstood relationship

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Whilst anger is a universal emotion that counsellors are likely to feel on occasions within their practice, a counsellor's experience of anger is rarely thought of as an important and valuable resource. This article explores a student counsellors personal and professional relationship with anger, how she 'did' anger and what it made possible for both herself and within her practice.

Keywords: *Anger, compassion, love, presence, Mastery, healing.*

"Imagine that the anger you were feeling is a pathway that leads you back to what's important. Where does it take you and what does it show you?" (Roffman, 2004).

In western culture, anger is often described in negative terms (Cox et al., 2004). Even when acknowledged as standard, the psychological language generally states or infers that it needs to be controlled and managed, suggesting danger or potential for adverse effects. Whilst anger has been described as an emotion, anger is often used interchangeably with assertion, aggression, and even violence (Chemaly, 2018). For clarity and the purposes of this paper, my definition of anger is an emotion, which I recognize as an activated, embodied feeling.

My experience as a student counsellor led me to wonder whether anger could be beneficial and even act as a resource within my counselling practice. Some researchers have suggested that rather than anger causing harm, it is the judgement of anger that causes anger ignorance (Reynolds, 2019) which hinders our ability to utilise it effectively and constructively. Supporting individuals to develop anger competence could allow it to become a vital resource. The term anger competence is defined as developing anger awareness, distinguishing between anger, assertion and aggression, and the deliberate and constructive expression of anger (Cox et al., 2004; Chemaly, 2018).

Roffman (2004) suggested that anger acts as a signal

of emotional importance and often relates to values, needs, inequity and breached boundaries, providing critical information for counsellors to be aware of within their practice. With so many potential benefits, I wondered why an intimate relationship with anger felt so at odds with the concept of being a counsellor? A few researchers suggested that clients benefit from gaining support from counsellors who developed and modelled anger competence (Cox et al., 2004; Chemaly, 2018). I wondered what anger competence would mean for me as a counsellor, what it would look like, how I might 'do' anger and what it might make possible within my practice? As I pondered these questions, I was forced to acknowledge that I might be anger incompetent. Whilst I had an intellectual awareness of what it might mean, I wanted to ground my learnings in the experience and context that would allow me a deeper understanding, that I might apply and use to develop my practice. The following study explores what anger competence means to me as a counsellor, how I 'do' anger, how anger might be helpful in my practice and what it makes possible?

Some background

I had spent the final year of studying a Masters in Counselling, both captivated and challenged by anger. It started innocently enough with me becoming curious about anger whilst working within the area of Domestic Violence (DV). It was curiosity that led me on a mysterious tour to discover a rich inner world I hadn't been aware of.

The Masters I was studying had introduced me to social constructionism, which familiarised me with the idea that world views are shaped by social constructs and subsequently got me noticing and challenging assumptions that I had previously accepted to be truths. It made me conscious of things I hadn't considered deeply before, such as power, social systems,

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language, meaning-making and the potential to limit and expand possibilities with our beliefs, thinking, language and meaning-making. These discoveries have offered me a more expansive view of myself, others, 'problems' and opportunities.

Also, as part of the Master's programme, I had clinical experience with a team of three other students and a supervisor where I was either a primary counsellor or part of a reflecting team. The team was an essential part of exploring anger, offering observations, asking questions to debrief and witnessing my journey. I had also been working as a volunteer counsellor with women and children who had experienced DV and was lucky enough to have regular external supervision, internal supervision and debriefing, which also supported the process of reflection. Whilst I rarely think to identify myself as a white western woman, I believe it is important to acknowledge that I am looking through that lens. The following paper is a reflexive account of my intimate experiences as a western woman who has been immersed in a western cultural world view all of my life, becoming curious about my assumption that anger is a negative and potentially harmful emotion.

I have used an auto-ethnographic method to share my journey with you. Auto-ethnography is an emerging qualitative research method based on postmodern philosophy that is more commonly used in anthropology, sociology and education (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2000; Etherington, 2004; McIlveen, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 1997). It is a form of critical inquiry, embedded in both the theory and practice of the researcher-practitioner (McIlveen, 2008) who uses self-reflection and writing to explore personal experience, connecting their story for more comprehensive social, cultural and political meanings and understandings. To explore my relationship with anger, I used personal and professional experience, journals, intentional reflexive positioning and multiple modes of supervision and debriefing to explore what it means to embrace and use anger as a tool and resource for myself personally, and within my practice. To do this, I needed to suspend my structural notion that anger needs to be controlled and managed and the cognitive approach I often used when addressing anger. Instead, I choose to invite it more fully into my world; feel it, observe how it showed up, acknowledge it to myself, colleagues and sometimes clients, listen to what it had to say, value its contribution and find ways to deliberately express anger and take action, that I hoped would be in service to both myself and clients. I review my experience of personally and professionally feeling, owning, acknowledging and exploring anger and challenging dominant discourses surrounding it whilst living and working within a system that often holds the idea that anger is harmful, needs to be controlled and managed as a truth.

This inquiry focuses on my unique and personal experience as a student counsellor connecting with participants within the counselling programme that I was part of and community settings. It offers my reflection of how anger might be used as a valuable tool and resource for counsellors in service to themselves and clients. I've decided to write in the first person to acknowledge my presence. Whilst other forms of research often attempt to limit the researcher's influence as much as possible to gain an objective conclusion, I hope that sharing my personal and very subjective experience will offer rich and detailed data that will act as stimulus material for you to consider and use in whichever way will be meaningful and valuable for you. You'll also notice I've offered lots of context of what invited me to explore anger, prompted my thinking, decisions and how

I came to certain conclusions because I wanted to ground it in lived experience and offer a representation of my process and experience, to allow you to connect with what captured your attention, consider your position, reflect on what was important to you, develop your meanings and consider the implications for your practice. I only hope that I can adequately convey a little of what I have experienced with the inevitable constraints of using language. I hope you also might allow yourself to suspend what you already know about anger and see what anger may come to mean for you.

Our Story

My relationship with anger started most surprisingly. Anger and I were not friends. In fact, I tried to keep my distance as much as possible. Although anger demanded my attention at times, it was never welcome. To be honest, I tried not to focus too much on anger and wasn't interested in creating a relationship with anger. I had become so proficient and skilled at sidestepping anger that I often wasn't aware of when it was present. As I endeavoured to maintain a healthy distance between us, the anger felt external to me and whilst it forced its way into my consciousness at times, I quickly dealt with it so that I could be the person I wanted to be in the world, which was most certainly NOT angry. In all honesty, I was far more interested in forging a relationship with love and compassion and anger felt separate and actually in opposition to them; as if anger might pull me in and away from who I wanted to be, but anger surprised me, and rather than being separate, it led me closer to both love and compassion. This is when our story begins...

Working as a volunteer counsellor with women and children who had experienced DV and the adverse effects of anger being used as a form of control and domination was a consistent theme and risk to consider. Whilst anger was often present in the stories I was hearing, it was generally related to the person who had used violence. Clients rarely spoke directly about anger being present for them, and if they did, it was fleeting, and the focus was quickly diverted. As they shared their experiences, I couldn't help but feel that anger might be an understandable response to what I was hearing and wondered why it was absent? Anxiety, sadness, depression, hopelessness was often present, so why not anger? I started to wonder whether there could be such a thing as a deficiency in anger? On occasions, clients and I would deconstruct emotions like anxiety in the session. I was always surprised at the wisdom that presented itself. Clients would often leave the room excited about what they had discovered. I started to wonder whether anger might actually hold similar knowledge and even act as a resource at times.

To understand more about anger and potential benefits, I began to read through research and broader texts. I often get this unsettled feeling when something doesn't make sense, and I could feel its presence, but I wasn't sure what it was about. Cognitively, I understood anger as an emotion, and so why did it need to be managed or controlled? Weren't emotions just information? So maybe there was more to anger, and I wondered what anger meant to me? As I read more, I realised that the term anger was often used interchangeably with responses to anger, such as assertion, aggression, control (Chemaly, 2018) and even violence which seemed to solidify anger's position as a negative emotion that needed to be controlled or managed, but wasn't an emotion separate from an action? Finally, I read about the importance of distinguishing between the emotion of anger and

the related activities (Cox et al., 2004; Chemaly, 2018), and I felt a calmness in my body that came with a deeper awareness that made sense. This helped me crystallise that anger showed up as an uncomfortable, activated, embodied feeling. As I came to this clarity, somehow anger seemed less frightening, and I pondered whether my discomfort with anger was more to do with what I had made anger mean, rather than the experience itself?

As I examined the data, I became much more aware of the gendered, socio, cultural and political bias that had significantly influenced anger was perceived, expressed and responded to within western culture. Many studies showed how gender roles and social messages were internalised at such a young age and to such an extent (Bayet et al., 2015; Chemaly, 2018; Thomas et al., 2009), that individuals and especially women were often completely unaware of how these hidden messages may have impacted their experience and expression of anger (Chemaly, 2018; Cox et al., 2004). Research also highlighted various other manifestations of anger: crying, self-silencing, eating, anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms (Thomas et al., 2009). However, Cox (2004) suggested these were more likely to be covert emotional ways to escape anger awareness. I pondered, had a fear of anger infiltrated us to such an extent?

The research suggested that those that diverted their anger experienced higher anxiety and other pathologies (Kopper et al., 1996; Maji et al., 2018; Munhall, 1993; Van Velsor et al., 2001). As I read more, I became aware of the pervasive implicit and explicit messages that suggested the expression of anger may threaten relationships, lead to social rejection and distress (Hatch et al., 2001; Cox et al., 2004), which often resulted in individuals ignoring their discomfort and prioritise the needs and feelings of others over their own.

I could feel a tightness in my body. Had we been programmed so much that we would ignore anger at all costs, even when it may harm us to do so?

Another author shared that anger always occurs in context or relationship to something (Roffman, 2004)

Yes, what about context? In the majority of papers, I had read about anger, authors rarely discussed context. Wasn't it normal to be angry sometimes?

I started to see that as anger is always experienced in a relationship to something or somebody and without the richness of relational context, it is easy to vilify anger which at the same time prevents it from sharing its wisdom and benefit. Whilst I understood why many might have concerns that anger could be used to control and dominate, I could also see how the demonisation of anger and ignorance of the context in which it occurs could also suppress, manipulate and control.

"This is fucked"

Chemaly (2018) had asserted, *"if someone does not consider why you are angry or why anger is your approach to a specific event or problem, they are almost certainly part of the problem"*. As I felt that tight embodied activation, I became more aware that whilst I may process anger on a cognitive level, I had rarely allowed myself to fully experience it. And as I became aware of how little I knew about anger, I acknowledged that I was very much part of this system. I often didn't seek context when I was angry. I just made myself wrong. I noticed with this new understanding of context, I felt more justified in being angry, and the activated feeling never seemed to be far away. It was like a beast that had been unleashed.

"Finally, some sanity."

I discovered a couple of rare studies related to sexual

abuse that acknowledged anger as a valid and appropriate response to experience (Apolinsky et al., 1991; Simmons, 1994), but did it take sexual abuse to make anger a valid response? Wasn't anger valid when any values or boundaries had been breached or when needs were unmet? The authors identified anger as an essential tool in the healing process (Cox et al., 2004). Even more interestingly, perhaps, they suggested that the benefit was more related to directly accessing the genuine response of anger rather than assigning responsibility.

I smirked, "I must be healed", I thought. Then quickly returned to the irony that whilst being able to access and respond to anger was healing, we were often discouraged from feeling and expressing anger.

"Surely this suggested that anger is more likely to be a solution rather than a problem".

"This is so fucked up."

It was becoming more straightforward and easier for me to notice the activated, visceral response I often experienced. However, at times I might have used softer terms such as irritation or frustration to identify it. The more I thought about the effects of anger having been pathologised, the gendered inequity, the systems that supported this and the consequences it had on women and the broader community, the more activation I felt in my body. I could see how these messages had impacted me, members of my family, clients and colleagues, and wondered if I ignored and suppressed anger because I was scared that it would damage a relationship or that I would be rejected? I felt a sinking and almost calm feeling present in my body that said, yes.

I thought about what was absent but implicit in anger's voice. Roffman (2004) had said simply, "something important is occurring," I thought about how many times I had inadvertently pushed past values, boundaries and what was important to me, how I had treated myself and what I had lost as a result. As I sat with the feeling, I considered all the incredible people I had connected with over the years who had put caring for others ahead of their own needs, all those who had ignored what was important to them and didn't feel able to claim their right to be and feel authentically in the world. I wondered whether anger would have helped them notice that, as it had me?

I wondered how it was possible to even change your relationship with anger and other emotions such as anxiety, sadness, depression, without fully engaging with them? That activated feeling seemed to be a constant companion as I thought about our western systems supposedly in place to create safety and well-being, yet pathologised emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression and sadness, inviting the individuals to feel wrong for feeling how they were feeling. As I considered this further, I was reminded of some of the tactics I had heard being used in DV, where clients had been ignored or punished for attempting to create boundaries and then made wrong for feeling angry or unhappy about it. It seemed to me that the pervasive belief that anger was wrong discouraged resiliency, respectful relationships, equity and compassion, rather than supporting it. I was furious.

I guess you can't 'un-know' something because I noticed that these new awarenesses remained active within me and would often ignite that increasingly common embodied feeling that let me know something significant was occurring. I did not want to be part of the charade and primed the team that I intended to really 'do' anger deliberately. They took every

opportunity to allow me to be and reflect on my experience and relationship with anger.

"Maybe you should call yourself the angry therapist?" a colleague teased. "Maybe I should", I smiled as I heard the others giggle in the room. I knew he had a point.

But as I naturally responded with a smile, I felt a different type of feeling in my body and heard that internal voice saying,

"Oh no, they think I'm angry", "I hope I'm not upsetting them", "are they trying to let me know nicely that I need to tone things down" "I hate feeling like this".

I couldn't help but wonder what the impacts might be of rejecting these social norms as a woman and counsellor; how might this impact my identity, relationships and practice?

I took a breath. I would never get to know if I opted out.

"If anger had a voice, what would it say?" one team member asked.

"This is bullshit, having a philosophy that talks about the importance of respectful relationships and then not respecting where someone is at".

I admitted sheepishly to the team halfway through the year, "I just feel like I'm always angry at the moment". They smiled.

Compassion Fatigue

I took part in a professional development workshop with some colleagues where the trainer mentioned 'Empathy puts people at higher risk for compassion fatigue and burnout.'

We all shouted, *"I've got that".*

I started to wonder whether the intense focus on empathy and compassion, together with the idea that anger was damaging to relationships, might invite counsellors to suppress 'negative emotions' such as anger which may have alerted them to self-care needs and instead prioritise the needs and feelings of others over their own. And whether this subsequently increased their risk of compassion fatigue?

"Maybe I had a point about a deficiency in anger?"

Germer et al. (2015) had posed the question, how can someone offer genuine compassion to others if they are unable to care for themselves compassionately? *I thought I provided genuine compassion, but I was beginning to wonder what did self-compassion even look like in practical terms?*

Kolts (2019) shares that Compassion begins with the courage to face the things that make us uncomfortable and what makes us most scared about ourselves. For me, I think it was anger.

Neff et al. (2003;2014) described the practice of self-compassion as being open to one's own emotions and suffering without avoiding or disconnecting from them and healing oneself with kindness. As I thought about the activated feeling that often appeared when I made myself wrong for feeling angry, it suddenly occurred that maybe anger was an invitation for compassion and that anger and compassion co-exist (Peters, 2015).

Serra (2014) describes anger as a warrior, wise and protective, constantly monitoring all of your edges with tireless diligence and never doubts the depths of your worth.

"I think I might be falling a little in love with anger", I mused.

I also learnt that self-compassion acted as a buffer against burnout (Barnard et al., 2011), and counsellors who better met self-care needs were more likely to set appropriate

boundaries and less likely to use clients to meet their own personal or professional needs (Neilson, 1988). I had noticed that being more aware of anger had allowed me to be more aware of my positioning and agendas.

Vignettes

In the following section, I will present some de-identified vignettes to illustrate my experiences with anger as a counsellor. The vignettes provide a brief context drawn from my extensive auto-ethnographic diary of reflections and learnings from debriefings and supervision.

Vignette 1: My admission of anger

I had the pleasure of being a primary therapist for a client over about six months. Initially, she had identified with feeling depressed and hopeless. However, more recently, she had been able to increase her working hours and identified with feeling capable and powerful to change her world. In this session, the client talked about how her workplace was demanding she have a mandatory flu vaccination despite having health issues that she felt would make it detrimental. As she spoke of feeling hopeless, I could feel the activation within and felt pulled to give advice. Still, as I concentrated on my breath, I became aware that my issue of systemic abuse of power was one trigger and my wish for things to be different for her another. Rather than following my agenda, I was able to reposition myself. I smiled and acknowledged, "I notice that I'm feeling angry at the moment". "Yes," she said, and I noticed her sink into herself. I imagine that my acknowledgement validated what she was feeling in some way, although she did not use the term anger. Interestingly though, her energy changed, and she seemed to shift her perspective from the situation being personal to a systemic issue which enabled her to consider some other possibilities that she identified as helpful.

Vignette 2: How I do anger

Whilst being part of the reflecting team and listening to a client recounting her experience of how she had tried to say no to her partner, which he would ignore and when she tried to reinforce her position, he had said, *"yeah, I'm a really bad boyfriend", "you're always attacking me".* The anger I felt got my attention and offered clarity. I recognised this as a common tactic I had heard from clients who had experienced DV that seemed to distract from addressing the issue at hand, often leaving the client feeling wrong, confused and disempowered to create change.

As I breathed to calm my nervous system, I was able to formulate a question,

"I wonder how it would be possible to reinforce a boundary when attempts to assert a position are received as an attack?"

As I shared the activation I had felt, the team asked me how I was able to formulate a question when I was triggered, and I realised that I did have a process to "do anger", which I shared with them.

"I concentrated on my breathe and deliberately increased the exhale. It helps me to create a space between the trigger and a response to gain clarity and perspective.

I realised that I had always used my breathing to calm my nervous system without really being conscious of it before. As I shared my process with them, I realised that this was how I "did" anger

Vignette 3: Ode to Anger

One author had suggested that non-expression of anger allows individuals to go in profoundly and truly feel anger. Whilst this seemed counter-intuitive to me, when I practised non-expression, I was able to fully feel and acknowledge anger in a deep way which created a feeling of the most incredible gratitude and appreciation for it. This is an extract from my journal.

Anger, I'm so sorry for how I have treated you. I can see that whatever is said about you, you are really love. In actual fact, I've never been loved like this before, so I didn't recognise you. You have always put my needs first, consistently trying to get my attention and remind me what was important to me, even when I was prepared to look the other way, and despite my treatment of you, you've never given up on me. You've continually stood by me and always have my best interests at heart in a way that no one else does, not even me. You're not silenced by inconvenient times or because it's 'inappropriate' or awkward. You're not prepared to ignore transgressions towards me, even when I try to minimise them. Anger, you have put me before anyone or anything, and I know I can trust you like no one else.

Conclusion

Whilst, I have felt vulnerable about sharing my intimate experience of anger, I have also found the whole process liberating as it allowed me to experience and represent my own personal truth, rather than being at the effect of the colonised views of western culture. Developing a closer relationship with anger allowed me to feel more whole, compassionate, adaptable and capable within myself as well as within my practice. It has helped me to notice and challenge binaries, has highlighted values and perceived threats, it has invited me to reflect and question my position and expand my consciousness around broader themes such as compassion, empathy, safety. It also invited me to be present to and listen and connect more compassionately to myself and others. It reminded me that intellectual knowledge is limiting without being grounded in experience and that social constructs such as anger aren't real. I recognised that by remaining connected and curious, I get to create more insight and freedom surrounding who I currently am and who I or others wish to become. More than anything, though, I was moved by the experience of anger being witnessed, accepted and valued as a part of me. It was profound and strengthening in a way that words are unable to convey, and I want to make that experience available to others.

I also want to be transparent and acknowledge that in an attempt to create some cohesion in the stories I've told you, I have left out some things which may give the impression of a more linear and logical approach, but in truth, it was anything but. Much of what I have described happened concurrently, I had numerous and spontaneous 'aha' moments in the most unlikely times and places; data was messy, often didn't make sense and felt generally chaotic. I've also tried to focus on my reflections and experience whilst offering enough context to scaffold understanding but also to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of those I was working with. Also, in becoming captivated by anger, I had to be careful not to seek it out in sessions and choose to focus on myself instead, rather than clients.

Peters (2015) offered that the true master's view is deeply emotional in nature and involves getting close enough to ourselves to see what's happening, be honest about it and

care for ourselves and others to the best of our ability. My broader hope is that as counsellors, we provide for ourselves and others the opportunity to engage in a 'mastery' approach; create supportive communities that are open to and supportive of engaging in an intimate relationship with emotions, that will challenge the dominant discourses and limiting constructs, whilst holding space, offering witness and to model and support emotional competence from a master's perspective.

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