

THE SAD ANGER: PICTORIAL EVIDENCE FOR ANGER AND SADNESS INTERTWINED RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN

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The present study intends to explore the relationship between sadness and anger as found in images produced by women in the context of art therapy. These two primary emotions are often observed together although the relationship to one another remains unclear. Three images will be presented supporting an intertwined relationship between anger and sadness in female emotional expression. It seems crucial to address the complex and subtle emotional expression of anger and sadness, as well as to recognize that beneath one of these emotions may reside the other. This study, hopefully, will allow art therapists, and other health professionals, to, first, better identify the issues at stake in therapy and, second, better help our clients by adapting therapeutic goals accordingly.

In 1997, at announcing Princess Lady Diana's death, CNN made the following statement: "*Mourning Diana: Sadness mingles with anger*" (September 2, 1997). Similar titles were also making the news after the events of September 11th. Dramatic circumstances often bring a wave of "mixed feelings" of anger and sadness, but how are the two emotions related? On an emotional continuum, sadness and anger seem to be so far apart from one another, it is hard to understand how they can even be connected. Yet, the two distinct emotions are often displayed together in mourning (Birnbaum, 1973; Stein, 1997), postpartum depression (Today Magazine, 1998) or when facing a terminal illness (Bach, 1990).

The present article attempts to consider that connection, if any, between anger and sadness, exploring available information from the different fields of neurobiology, physiology, linguistics and psychology. Theories of emotion as well as feminist perspectives will be addressed to help understand one of the most misunderstood emotions, anger.

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Anger and Sadness: A Review

The majority of theories on emotions would identify joy, anger, sadness and fear as human primary emotions (Christophe, 1998; Goleman, 1995; Plutchik, 1994). Although most people are aware of the possible physical and emotional consequences of anger on health and relationships, very little is known about anger in terms of its neurological pathways or biochemical etiology. Of all emotions, anger is probably the one that is most disturbing and, paradoxically, least understood.

Recently, for instance, Pelletier et al. (2001) have identified similar brain pathways for joy and sadness expression. Using magnetic resonance imagery (MRI), the Montreal-based scientific team has shown that emotions of joy and sadness unexpectedly use the same cerebral pathways. According to Beaugard (personal conversation, 2002), a member of that team who has studied extensively the biochemistry of emotion, very little is known about anger neurological pathways and biochemical process, as few studies have included it in their research. Although the reason behind this fact remains unclear, it is still representative of our general uneasiness toward anger.

On the other hand, literature is filled with self-help techniques and possible skills acquired through anger-management programs. One can find an extraordinary choice of manuals on how to cope, control, express, eliminate, decrease or deal with anger. Just as we are unable to fully explain its process, we do recognize its impact on individuals, social relationships and so forth. Birnbaum (1973), for example, stated: "... the one emotion that creates the most pain, guilt, anxiety, and depression – our anger" (p.3).

Hence, anger is perceived as an overwhelming feeling that causes distress not only to the individual who carries the angry feeling but also to the surrounding people. Stein (1997) who has studied anger and sadness expression in children of holocaust survivors defines anger as "a strong feeling of displeasure that is aroused by a sense of injury or insult" (p.21). The author, in reviewing

research done on anger, concludes that not only have very few studies been done, but also that conclusions are often conflicting. Methodological problems often occur using different types of tests to measure and quantify angry feeling and expression. More experiments, concluded Stein (1997), are needed to clarify the relationship between anger and sadness.

The Physiology of Anger and Sadness

Physiologically, anger and sadness have quite different responses. Angry feelings are known to enhance blood circulation, heart rate and adrenaline (Goleman, 1995). The bodily reaction to anger promotes survival, enabling the individual to respond to possible danger. The sympathetic nervous system is hence stimulated to react accordingly in fight or flight response. Anger is not only a basic, natural emotion; it is also crucial to the survival of species and its members.

Sadness, although with opposite physiological response, also serves survival purposes. Firstly, sadness is defined as: “an emotional state that involves feelings of unhappiness and sorrow. It is the cardinal symptom of depression” (Stein, 1997, p.21). According to Goleman (1995), its main function is “to help adjust to a significant loss” (p.7), such as death or disappointment. The physiological response accompanying sadness involves a significant decrease in energy level, as well as lower blood flow and heart rate. Because the organism may be more vulnerable to possible danger or threat, the sad feelings trigger withdrawal responses.

Anger and sadness, therefore, use different physiological response patterns in order to protect and maintain life. This biological explanation, however, does not explain why the two different emotions occur together in a confusing manner in the “mixed feeling” response often observed in female emotional expression.

Possible Explanations: The Faces of Anger

Anger is a complex construct that involves not only theories of emotions but also challenges developmental and psychological theories. Hence, these theories will be considered in the following section but first, let us consider the relationship between anger and depression.

Anger and Depression: Mad or Sad ?

Generally, depression is seen as sadness at its strongest. However, there seems to be an important relationship between anger and depression (Birnbaum, 1973; Johnson, 1990; Stein, 1997). Birnbaum, for instance, in “*Cry Anger – A cure for depression*” (1973) observes the fact that many individuals actually cry during the expression of angry feelings. Moreover, the psychiatrist clearly relates depression to anger; that is, anger being turned *inward* in self-blaming behaviors. The feelings of anger thus become a tool against the individual in self-torturing depression and its main appearing symptom, sadness.

According to the author, people with depression use self-directed anger and blame, not self-pity or sympathy, in their language: “Frequently the anger you turn upon yourself is hostility that you actually feel toward others: anger that you will not express or even fantasize outwardly” (p.46). Birnbaum (1973) also suggests that there exist different forms of internalized anger. Guilt, shame, depression, anxiety, and search for perfectionism, all fulfill, according to the author, anger masking roles.

Furthermore, Johnson (1990) not only associates anger to depression but also considers its deep effect on health. Linked with hostility and aggression, feelings of anger may have tremendous effects on general health. According to the author, the detrimental consequences of angry feelings may be due to the frustration, or the feelings of hopelessness and learned helplessness. These feelings can also be observed in depression.

The relationship, therefore, between anger and depression seems important considering when looking at a possible link between anger and sadness. In other words, depression may find its *causal root* in anger whereas sadness remains its main *symptom*.

Developmental Explanation: Language

Language may also play an important role in the “mixed feeling” expression. It is interesting to note that the intertwined relationship between anger and sadness may also find its roots in language construction. Findings from a research on grammar and emotion labeling revealed that

young children often confuse angry and sad feelings when reporting them (Bamberg, n.d.). The study found that American English-speaking children confused these two emotions solely, when asked to report on joy, sadness, anger and fear. Even though the study cannot explain the cause of such “mixed feelings” linguistic, it may be the case that it involves other subtle processes than grammatical issues solely. More research would also be needed to observe if such confusion exists in other languages.

However, one must also consider gender issues as a possible bias in that experiment. Although the previous study does not indicate the gender distribution of the 80 children involved in the study, that factor alone can have a tremendous impact. To illustrate, an emotional labeling study found that mothers identify young “upset” children as being sad when the child was a girl whereas boys were seen as being mad (Fivush (1989) as stated in Hatch, 2001). Gender roles and/or stereotypes may largely contribute to the language used by children, and perhaps to its linguistic confusion. Both boys and girls may be expected to act a certain way and label their emotional experiences accordingly.

Attachment Theory: Angry and Sad

In trying to find an explanation for the close relationship between anger and sadness, we must also consider Bowlby’s views (1973). In “*Anger, Anxiety, and Attachment*”, the author suggests how anger portrays the ambivalence and anxiety felt by the child due to the separation from mother. The angry feeling withholds either one of hope or despair about the loss of the parental figure. The angry reaction helps overcome the difficult event and prevent further separation. According to Bowlby’s theory, the feelings of anger are therefore aroused to promote the bond between the mother and the child.

Sadness, on the other hand, expresses the mourning and the grief felt toward the *loss* itself (Bowlby, 1980). Thus, both feelings of anger and sadness seem truly intertwined in children’s experience of separation. The separation, and the loss involved, may trigger the “mixed feelings”, making it difficult for the toddler to cognitively process the concurrent emotional experience.

In addition, according to Bowlby (1973), anger can also be associated with *destruction*. This is true particularly when there is a serious threat of abandonment or when the child is in fact being left alone several times, leading to possible dysfunctional anger responses. That destructive quality linked to anger is also addressed in theories of emotions. Plutchik’s model for instance (as stated in Christophe, 1998) attributes to the angry emotional state a function of destruction whereas sadness serves one of reintegration.

It may be where the drawings that are about to be presented find their meaning; that is, within this bipolar search for reintegration after symbolic, psychical or emotional destruction. But before looking at these images, let us consider art therapy research on anger.

Seeing Red, Feeling Blue

Within the art therapy field, few researches have been done on anger. Desormeaux (2000), for instance, has proposed a feminist approach to art therapy with women dealing with anger issues. Her research looked at images created by women who had a tendency to repress anger or express it ineffectively. Besides the assessment purposes of the study, the results also suggested a possible relationship between anger repression and depressed moods. A possible link between health and anger expression was also addressed, that is, the healthiest participant associated anger expression to positive experience in the images.

Kaplan (1996) is one of the few art therapists to extensively explore anger through images for its assessment purposes. The author suggests that although anger can bare positive and negative qualities, it is most often associated with negative destruction and/or power. For women in particular, the feelings of anger are mainly associated with loss of control whereas men link them to ways of controlling others. In her work, the author also addresses cultural differences within anger expression.

Vignettes

The following images were produced in the context of art therapy by three different women with distinct clinical diagnoses. The content of these artworks, as well as verbal interpretation

done by the client, exhibit that “mixed feelings” of anger and sadness expression.

Case #1

Figure #1 was drawn by S., a 55-year-old woman who was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. The image is entitled “*Le feu qui tue*” (French for “*The Killing Fire*”) and depicts red flames under blue and yellow soft curved lines. These were used, explained S, to represent the tip of the iceberg of her sadness. Under that icy, depressive feeling, she adds, lays one of rage that melts the ice away into tears.

The destructive nature of anger and its potential danger can be observed in S’s comment to the therapist. She shares her worries about the potential threat the angry flames portray. Their destructive power may scare the therapist and she needs to be reassured: “Aren’t you scared of this drawing?” she asked the art therapist. Her question carries her concern that the therapist might abandon her or feel overwhelmed by her angry feelings. The fear of abandonment may find its explanation in Bowlby’s theory addressed earlier.

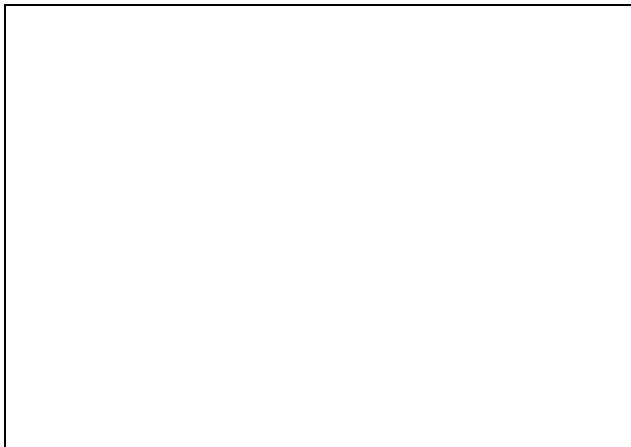


Figure 1

Case #2

Our second drawing (*Figure #2*) was done by J., a 55-year-old woman who lives with a learning disability and sexual abuse history. Her drawing depicts two eyes, each expressing the two different emotions, anger and sadness. One eye is red and emits thunders whereas the other, the blue eye, liberates the tears.

Again, in this image, the two emotions are expressed together as they are being felt together. When referring to the sexual abuse, J. says she is

feeling both angry and sad and the drawing was an attempt to express that confusing emotional state. The aggression triggers angry feelings but the client also feels sad about losing her “innocence” as a child.

In this instance, we find another reference to Bowlby’s view. The sadness, in this case, is felt toward a significant *loss*, that of child innocence. As mentioned earlier, recovering from significant losses is, in fact, the role of sadness.

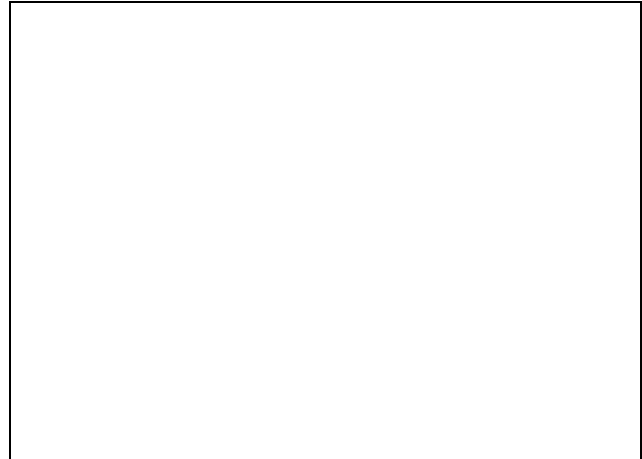


Figure 2

Case #3

B., a 45-year-old woman diagnosed with schizophrenia did the following image (*Figure #3*). She openly reveals having to deal with anger issues. In fact, she came to art therapy to learn to deal with these overwhelming angry feelings. Her painting is entitled “*Angry Sky*”. As often seen in drawings done by individuals who live with schizophrenia, there is an anthropomorphic quality to the painting. As the image depicts a rainbow with the sea and two clouds, that same picture also reveals a *crying face*. In fact, the clouds become the crying eyes over a rainbow and a lake that resemble an opened mouth.

As for the story involved, B. explained that six chosen people were on a boat trying to make it to the other side but were challenged by two huge storms. These were the hands of God, she says, sending two distinct challenges for them to overcome. One may wonder if it is God’s anger, as referred to several times in the Bible. Consider, for instance, this excerpt from Exodus 32:10: “Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will

make you into a great nation". Finally, anger also appears as one of the seven capitals sins.

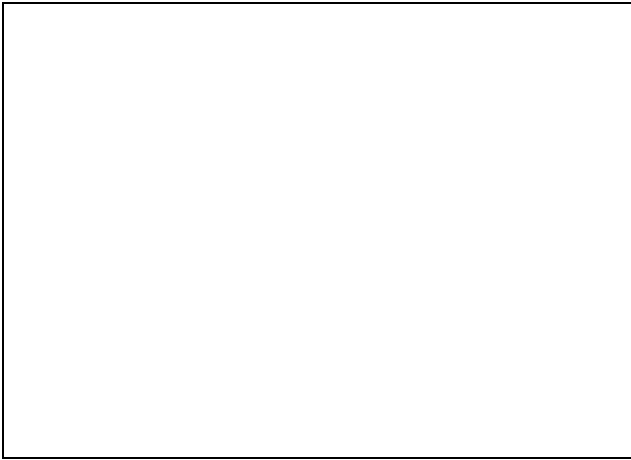


Figure 3

From these three images, we can recognize, first, how sadness and anger are often displayed together in women's emotional expression; second, the underlying and perceived destructive nature of anger; and third, the crying behavior as part of either or both emotional expression. The question remains: are tears the expression of sadness or anger in female emotional expression or a result of the two emotions colliding simultaneously?

Nevertheless, the emotional "mixed feeling" remains important to acknowledge because underneath sadness may also lie anger; and vice versa. This emotional duality becomes crucial for art therapists and other health professionals to identify as the treatment and intrinsic goals have to consider the underlying, often unnamed, emotion. That 'mixed feeling' reality alone can seriously alter therapeutic goals and future interventions.

Gender Role

These vignettes and respective images illustrate women's experience of "mixed feelings". It would be interesting to study if such intertwined emotional response can be observed among male participants. Further investigation is hence needed to research men's pictorial response to either anger or sadness, or both. Is the mixed feelings expression of anger and sadness one of women's? When considering the feminist perspective, it may be so.

Feminist Perspective: Crying

Feminist theory offers a unique interpretation of the relationship between anger and sadness. Many feminists would argue that anger remains a dilemma for both girls and women since anger expression may result in social rejection and emotional distress (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1992; Hatch, 2001). When considering the negative consequences, girls and women may be less likely to express angry feelings as opposed to boys and men.

Moreover, women who suppress their anger are more likely to be rewarded, according to Hatch (2001). In fact, it is argued that women may opt or label their emotional experience as sadness or hurt feelings in order to avoid labels and experiences of anger. However, sadness and depression seem more socially acceptable for women.

On the other hand, Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault and Benton (1992) argue that anger expression is misinterpreted as hurt feelings: "...one of the reasons why as adults we had difficulty in expressing anger was that whenever we became really angry we accompanied our verbal expression of that anger by "bursting into tears"" (p.171). The authors argue that women cry over loss, separation and grief. They may cry when angry, sad or fearful. The same behavior may be used to express different feelings.

There is thus a complex relationship between anger, fear and crying. Theories of social conditioning suggest that boys are not punished for aggression (presumably arising out of anger), whereas girls are. Therefore, women are socialized not to be aggressive, and hence perhaps not to be angry. But such theories suppose that anger and aggression are inseparable. These theories have been used to explain why in situations of stress men become violent and women become depressed – depression being seen as anger turned inward. (Crawford et al., 1992, p. 172)

As seen in these three images, not only women's *verbal* expression of anger becomes accompanied by crying but also the *non-verbal* expression of it. In other words, female pictorial expression of anger and sadness may also involve tears. If women cry in a diverse emotional situation, it thus becomes even more important to

name the emotion felt and not assume she is sad.

In clinical setting, therefore, it becomes crucial to consider the emotion behind the crying behavior. This is true even more so in clinical diagnosis of depression in women. While focusing on depressive feelings, for instance, and its main symptom and expression of sadness, the possible underlying anger may well not be addressed during treatment where in fact the angry feelings may be the cause of the internal conflict. The recognition of "mixed feelings" in women's experience of anger and sadness offers us an opportunity to adapt our therapeutic approaches and goals, and hence facilitate the healing process.

Conclusion

This article looked at the possible relationship between anger and sadness in women. In exploring the reasons underlying the "mixed feelings" response, various approaches and theoretical explanations have been considered, including Bowlby's theory of attachment. As seen in the images presented, women often express sadness and anger altogether. Women, within a feminist perspective, seem more reluctant to express angry feelings because of social taboo and negative consequences. Feelings of sadness seem more socially acceptable for women.

More research, however, is needed on anger expression within women and men to further our understanding of these two basic emotions, anger and sadness. Additional studies might be able to identify where the relationship between the two emotions takes place. As one client once put it, anger and sadness go together because, she said, they both hurt.

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