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Anger Is All the Rage: A Theoretical Analysis of Anger Within Emotional Ecology to Foster Growth and Political Change

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Abstract

Background and Purpose: Anger is implicated in nearly every social pathology, from war to bullying to child abuse. Yet, it is also the spark of reform for nearly every positive social movement, from civil rights to labor rights to handicapped rights. This article examines how anger has been understood and misunderstood across different discursive spaces in society, research, and education to offer a peace-promoting, emotional ecology theory of anger to foster emotional growth and political change.

Research Design: This article employs theoretical research, which is a logical exploration of a system of beliefs and assumption to increase understanding, develop new theory, and explore implications.

Findings: Anger is reconceptualized as a crucial emotional and political experience rooted in the emotional ecologies and histories of family, school, and society. Three distinctive features characterize it: An ethical response, an emotional response, and an action response. Five steps to anger resolution follow from this analysis including: mindfulness, compassion, insight, action, and a therapeutic response (or MCIAT).

Recommendations: Future studies on anger should span developmental stages and include ways anger intersects with curricula, emotional experience and intellectual understanding. Teachers, social workers, and therapists must work together to address the emotional and political aspects of anger in education. Addressing our most painful and angering global challenges in all their complexity requires full integration of the personal, educational, civic, and therapeutic dimensions of emotional ecology and this worthy enterprise should inspire interdisciplinary dialogue and future research.

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Recent public discourse features public protests ranging from Black Lives Matter to right-wing election contestment. Along with protests, there have been heated debates about the line between productive and dangerous anger. “Whether white Americans can express anger that Black Americans cannot” (Phoenix, 2021) and how educators should respond are debated. Nevertheless, anger remains an oddly contested concept in private, social, and civic life. In political and legal spheres, angry polarization is common and even encouraged. Yet in other contexts, such as at school and home, anger is usually considered a problematic negative emotion that is to be quickly stifled or resolved. Anger is implicated in nearly every social pathology, from war to bullying to child abuse, yet it is also the spark of reform for nearly every positive social movement, from civil rights to labor rights to handicapped rights. Anger, therefore, has an odd dual role because it is connected to both shameful and righteous feelings and is thus suppressed or freely expressed in different contexts. This complexity is poorly understood and readily confused among educators. Anger is typically censored in classrooms and schools, and teachers and psychologists often try to find ways to control, manage, and suppress it. Anger is considered a negative emotion. I argue that this reflects a limited view of anger and the positive purposes (especially psychological, political, and social) it can serve. Instead of trying to hide anger, teachers should be helping students learn how to understand, express, and act upon their anger constructively and view anger as something that occurs within the emotional ecologies of the students and the system they live in. However, school counselors, therapists, and educators in health, social studies, and critical pedagogy all have very different paradigmatic understandings and pedagogical responses to anger. They offer divergent and often contradictory interpretations of negative emotions and of pedagogical practices to respond to them. Without a reconceptualization that both synthesizes and distinguishes among approaches, those who wish to understand problems of anger or introduce conflict resolution and reconciliation may be operating at cross-purposes because even essential words and concepts such as “anger” and “conflict” may carry many different meanings in different disciplines and different educational contexts.

This article discusses how anger and anger education have been understood and misunderstood across different discursive spaces in education to offer a peace-promoting, emotional ecology theory of anger to foster emotional growth and political change. To date, theoretical writing about anger has come from divergent fields with widely divergent interpretations of anger and implications for educators. The new theoretical frame presented in this article is a synthesis and “emotional audit” of the science of anger, cultural and school practices related to anger, and approaches to anger resolution. Anger is reconceptualized as a crucial emotional and political experience rooted in the emotional ecologies and histories of family, school, and society. Three

distinctive features characterize it: an ethical response, an emotional response, and an action response. Five steps to anger resolution follow from this analysis.

The Science of Anger: What Is It?

What is anger? Research in psychology offers a scientific portrait of the nature and scope of anger. Anger is “a negatively toned emotion, subjectively experienced as an aroused state of antagonism toward someone or something perceived to be the source of an aversive event” (Novaco, 2020, p. 34), and it includes “the arousal component, as in stress reactivity with concomitant autonomic arousal; [and] cognitive components, including heightened attention to threat, hypervigilance, and hostile attributions” (Alia-Klein et al., 2020, p. 480). Anger is also a common experience. A seminal study by Averill (1982) reviewed 75 years of psychological research on anger. It concluded that “depending upon how records are kept, most people report becoming mildly to moderately angry anywhere from several times a day to several times a week” (p. 1146). Although studies on the incidence of anger declined after the 1970s, and there is no recent comprehensive review, we can safely assume that anger is still common. Since the 1980s, a growing new body of research literature has been developing that details emotions’ cognitive, neurological, endocrinal, and immunological nature. This research is increasingly referenced in education. Anger and “negative affect” have significant measurable health consequences in both acute and chronic forms, and anger can exacerbate and even stimulate a wide range of health pathologies (Herbert & Cohen, 1993; Krantz & McCeney, 2002).

Conversely, the research literature details the physiology and biochemistry of well-managed anger, forgiveness, and compassion (Papri & Prahan, 2012; Pressman & Cohen, 2005). For example, formal training in mindfulness and anger resolution induces positive short- and long-term neural changes (Lutz et al., 2004), and when people without any meditative or formal training simply deliberately emote a peaceful facial expression, it is associated with measurable decreases in heart rate (Hess et al., 1992). Anger also turns out to be challenging to characterize, measure, or unequivocally capture by science or social science across multiple studies. Barrett (2006) finds no *one-to-one* correspondence between anger, fear, shame, and any response profile and/or emotion-specific mechanism. Neither subjective experience, facial and vocal signals, peripheral nervous system responses, voluntary behaviors, nor neural circuitry appears to be universally distinctive of anger. Anger cannot be located consistently in either the brain or the body. Whatever theorists propose about anger at the phenomenological, physiological, expressive, behavioral, or neural levels, researchers also find instances of anger *without* those signatures. Anger is, therefore, elusive, diverse, and complex as a biological experience.

Conceptions of Anger in Classrooms and Schools

Anger in educational literature is most commonly discussed in classroom management research. It is most typically understood as a negative emotion that should be immediately discouraged through discipline and classroom management practices. In writing

typical of the field, Michael Linsin (2010) in *Smart Classroom Management* says, “emotional outbursts, temper tantrums, yelling, lashing out. Severe misbehavior like this needs to be dealt with differently than typical rule-breaking.” As described by Linsin, anger is “severe misbehavior” regardless of the context or reason for the anger. Suggestions typically include calming the immediate expression of anger, holding students accountable, and providing what Linsin calls “stiff consequences” (p.59). Anger is thus described as an inappropriate or distorted reaction often conflated with aggression.

As Lochman and Wells (2002) point out, the “contextual social-cognitive model assumes that aggressive children have distortions in their social-cognitive appraisals and deficiencies in their social problem-solving skills and that their parents have deficiencies in their parenting behaviors” (p. 945). The opportunity to understand and help students in classrooms is limited chiefly to therapeutic and special education contexts. Most commonly, angry students are still simply disciplined. For example, a national survey of school principals found that only little more than one-third (35%) reported “having a plan for teaching SEL [social emotional learning] and were currently systematically implementing it school-wide” (DePaoli et al., 2017, p. 4). Although social-emotional learning programs to address anger in school are increasing, a chance to understand and process anger is still primarily offered to students whose anger has been made pathological by school administrators, counselors, and psychologists through the special education diagnostic label “emotionally disturbed” (Bostic et al., 2021; Weiland, 2020).

Demographic data show that the expression of anger is more powerfully shamed and punished when the angry person is comparatively powerless or from a marginalized population. Angry girls in school are punished more severely than angry boys (Brown, 1999; Letendre, 2007), and women who commit retaliatory crimes receive heavier sentences than men (Comack & Brickey, 2007). Angry Black students in school are punished more severely and more often than angry White students (Harkrider, 2020; Hilberth & Slate, 2014). When social class is controlled for as a variable, this discrepancy still holds. “While African American students in poverty are more likely to be suspended than poor White students, middle and upper-class Black students are also more likely to be suspended than their peers at the same demographic level” (Skiba & Williams, 2014, p. 5). Racial disparity in discipline is also not a regional phenomenon. In a review of national data, Hassan and Carter (2020) found that Black female students were disproportionately suspended compared with White female students in both the high and low academically performing states. The social censure and formal negative consequences of anger are more significant for children than for adults, for women than for men, for minorities than for majority people, and for employees than for employers. Angry employees are at more risk of losing their job than angry employers (Kreamer, 2013; Morrison, 2014), so administrators may express anger without a career consequence more than teachers can.

An Emotional Incidents in the Workplace Survey of 700 employees (Kreamer, 2011) found that “women reported feeling angry at work more than men did, especially younger women (ages 18–44). However, men were more likely to express their

anger, which suggests that they feel safer in doing so” (p. 52). Anger among the powerful is seen as a normal by-product of retaining legitimate control, whereas anger among the powerless is seen as a threat to the status quo. When the powerful are angry, they seem in control and stronger when their emotions are displayed. In 2001, Tiedens showed across four studies that people grant more status to politicians and colleagues who express anger than to those who express sadness or guilt. The angry president sending out troops and the angry CEO or school superintendent are seen as taking control of a situation. However, when the powerless are angry, they are considered out of control and weaker.

Students in the classroom are not typically educated in understanding why their anger arises or how to manage the emotion. When anger is understood to be deviant behavior requiring punishment or management, students are to quell the outward manifestations of anger while the inner experience is left unaddressed. In addition, the classroom management approach to students’ anger is shaming, because the mere expression of anger is considered co-equal with misbehavior and deviance. The angry student is frequently the object of public shame because teachers commonly use public behavior management techniques such as writing students’ names on the board and announcing the loss of privilege such as recess time to showcase the pathology of the angry incident. Brene Brown (2006) observed that shame is “an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (p. 46). However, McCaslin et al. (2016) find that a student’s reaction to shame, like a reaction to injustice, is complex and is “co-regulated” (McCaslin, 2009) by “the mutual press among varied simultaneous sources of influence: cultural (e.g., poverty density), social (e.g., social/instructional classroom formats), and personal (e.g., readiness to learn).” Like anger, shame can ultimately be positive or negative depending on complex personal and contextual factors. To be clear, it is the public expression of anger that is typically shamed and suppressed in school, not anger itself. Students do not usually learn that anger may be destructive or learn about the feeling and not to suppress it. Instead, students primarily learn not to express anger. Because this emotion is so intensively pathologized in school, students who themselves have not been punished for the expression of anger learn that it is a dangerous, shameful emotion to be immediately suppressed.

The typical punishment of anger in school is also highly transactional. Students “pay” for the crime of anger with “consequences,” which could be anything from loss of a recess to expulsion from school. Once the payment has been made, the incident is perceived to be resolved. An explicitly transactional payment approach is used for incidents judged by the teacher or administrator to require forgiveness and apology; however, the complex feelings accompanying moral regret and the capacity to understand and release anger and forgive are not taught. Students rarely learn about the internal moral deliberations and the emotional nature of apologizing and forgiving. The focus is instead on external *measurable* words and actions. Relatedly, suppose the punishment payment is understood to be too low. In that case, if a student-perpetrator

who has done a bad thing is judged to have been inadequately punished, the student-victim need not “give” forgiveness, for example, “since we could tell that Kevin was not really sorry, I couldn’t really ask Sophia to forgive him.” Forgiveness is something to “give,” like an object or a payment, rather than a process with an end state. Punishment as a payment can resolve anger (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Griffiths & Parkes, 2010; Wilde, 2002).

The persistently angry student is likely to be considered “emotionally disturbed” and formally evaluated within special education or by an educational psychologist for this condition, which entitles the student to learn to manage anger through special education referral. Anger is comprehensively addressed in the professional resources for the “emotionally disturbed” and thus disabled students who have problems with “managing anger, frustration and other emotions that tend to exacerbate conflict with peers, teachers, and school administrators” (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], 2022, p. 42). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400, the formal definition of emotional disturbance (ED) includes “an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers” and “inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstance”; this federal definition does not mention anger, but state and school system assessments often focus on observing expressions of anger. Anger is the most “inappropriate” emotion.

Within school psychology, although “there are no specific diagnostic anger disorders,” there are “different *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) diagnostic categories that psychologists might use to classify youth with anger problems” (DiGiuseppe et al., 2017, p. 349). When anger is explicitly described as a disease state it can also be treated with psychiatric medicine (Edwards et al., 2009):

Avenues for treating anger include medications such as antidepressants and anticonvulsants, the latter of which help with impulsivity, and a class of drugs called serenics, which . . . work primarily through dampening limbic system responses. Treating underlying mood disorders or depression can also help alleviate angry outbursts.

Anger is pathologized in the description above, and further, in this medical paradigm, it is considered something that comes from a person rather than a context and is typically considered a state or a trait. State anger (Spielberger et al., 1995) is defined as psychobiological subjective feelings of fury and rage with concomitant activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system. Trait anger is defined as *how often* anger is experienced (Spielberger et al., 1995), and people with high trait anger *perceive* a broader range of situations as anger-provoking. They also feel rage and fury more often, more intensely, and in longer durations, which is both socially and physiologically detrimental (Williams et al., 2000). Trait anger is thus a problem with a student’s perception. Eckhardt and Deffenbacher (1995) explain that an individual’s “enduring traits and characteristics” drive a particular anger episode. Anger, in this discourse, is

a problematic enduring personal trait. This conceptualization ignores the social contexts and emotional ecologies in which students live.

Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Treatments of Anger

Common negative perspectives on anger in school discussed in the previous section can lead to the suppression of anger among students. Uncomfortable teachers might deliberately or subconsciously encourage students not to express negative emotions, even when the anger is appropriate. Unease can lead to the sanitizing of classroom topics in which peer conflict is denied and difficult subjects, from racism to divorce, are avoided. From a psychoanalytic perspective, “The curriculum is a product of the dynamic interplay between teacher and student” (Field, 1989, p. 974). Teachers who are uneasy with anger may skirt difficult topics, such as environmental degradation and prejudice, common in literature, social studies, and science curricula. Psychoanalytic educational theory posits that despair and anger in the classroom are avoided because the emotional, intellectual, and political dimensions involved in its resolution are often unpleasant and highly psychologically and emotionally demanding (Britzman, 1998, 2013). The ethics and pedagogy of exposing students to traumatic knowledge are difficult and complex. Some curriculum topics are inherently upsetting and angering if appropriately understood. Science, social studies, and literature all entail difficult, tragic, and sometimes frightening knowledge and the resulting psychological challenges of imagining potentially catastrophic and threatening events. As Felman (1992) explains, education cannot be understood merely as the transmission of passive knowledge, suggesting that “if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly been taught” (p. 53). Difficult knowledge removes students from emotional comfort zones and pulls them away from known and definable ways to understand issues and relationships. As Pitt and Britzman (2003) describe, student reactions to “difficult knowledge” recognize the traumatic effects new knowledge can potentially present for students (p. 759). Shim (2014) describes her students’ reactions to “difficult knowledge” in her antiracist curriculum with psychoanalytic terms observing that the students’ “threat of loss of authority, knowledge, and control was transferred to feelings of anger, despair, and frustration that led to heartbreak” (p. 12). About anger, Kessler (2004) observes that “anger can also be a bridge, an intermediary step between denial and grief. It can be a protection against the sadness that is the most vulnerable place on the wheel of grief,” and she notes that “it can be dangerous when we become stuck there [in anger] because we are too afraid to move into vulnerability” (p. 5). It is not surprising that teachers and students may elect to avoid anger because they have not been educated in dealing with the complex thoughts, feelings, and potential actions that commonly result. Students’ emotional responses can be uncertain. Fear can be processed as anger. The human condition can be saddening or angering; students may feel sad, horrified, disappointed in people, and angry. Teachers and students must work

to understand the nature of the human condition and understand what they are angered about across the varied emotional ecologies of family, school, communities, and countries. The situations of injustice that cause righteous anger, when carefully understood, open the door to many contexts for anger and some of the most difficult truths humans must face.

Further, students and teachers do not have individual control or agency over things that happen to us or are done by us, which can be overwhelming. The hypo reaction of despair and the hyper reaction of high anger (Heilman, 2021) are both familiar emotions because it is possible to feel as though one has no control over what occurs in life and to feel as though one has some hint of responsibility for everything we are connected to, and we are connected to a great deal. Ethical philosopher Bernard Williams (1981) describes how one might feel in control of nothing and yet responsible for everything by offering a web-like image of responsibility, noting that “one’s history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not” (p. 81). Thomas Nagel (1979) offers the control principle (CP) to make sense of the moral and emotional difficulties of the human condition. As Nelkin (2013) describes this, we are “morally assessable only to the extent that what we are assessed for depends on factors under our control.” Philosopher Brynmore Browne (1992) then suggests that if we accept that we all have limited control over our fate, we ought *not* to respond to wrongdoing with anger and blame. In other words, nobody is entirely individually to blame for their actions or worthy of our anger because nobody individually creates situations. Relatedly, Emanuel Levinas (1996) argues that both the extent of human suffering and our inability to “cure” require that people develop responsibility to each other independent of our culpability or our ability to solve problems. Diamantides (2007) writes:

To be exposed to absurd suffering without being consumed by it requires me to invent for myself a sense of responsibility for the Other’s suffering irrespective of whether I caused it, can comprehend it or cure it. Indeed, for Levinas, the fact that suffering is absurd poses the primordial and inevitable problem with succor as my duty. (p. 5)

Succor is our duty to give assistance and support in times of hardship and distress. These are interesting philosophical perspectives on responding to upsetting social issues and feelings of anger and responsibility that teachers can discuss with students.

Psychoanalytic and philosophical treatments of anger emphasize the inescapably unjust and angering nature of human existence—thus the school curriculum, the concomitant need nonetheless to act in a morally defensible and emotionally sustaining way. Accepting the world and humans as tragic and “incurable” and having some agency or vestigial optimism to make improvements are essential aspects of addressing anger in the classroom. The feeling of anger includes both threatened hopelessness and a will toward action. Engaging difficult, tragic, and frightening knowledge in schools, therefore, potentially requires the repositioning of both students’ psychological-emotional responses and their ethical-political reorientations because so much of

human experience and history makes emotional, ethical, and political demands upon us. The energy and agency of anger in response to a tragic and sometimes frightening world can thus be considered a vital teaching resource.

Anger in Critical Theory and Pedagogy

Anger in the critical tradition is viewed primarily as a resource, and it is viewed as being caused not by the human condition but by the political and economic system. There is an old saying that “if you are not angry, you are not paying attention.” As Gilbert (2017) explains:

I intend to evoke the anger on the part of students from oppressed groups, especially students of color, who are faced with the attempted erasure, silencing, and flattening of their experiences and identities through the social studies curriculum. This kind of anger, I submit, is beautiful, something which speaks to students’ humanity and intelligence, and which is often a part of a struggle to maintain an authentic voice. (p. 379)

From this perspective, it harms students and society if their anger is suppressed. Thus, critical theorists and pedagogues seek to address how cultural and economic forces, particularly schools, can increase justice or legitimate unequal, undemocratic societies.

In the critical perspective, the causes of oppression, human suffering, and anger are attributed to “the productive apparatus” (Marx, 1867/1967)—that is, the social institutions in which people are educated, employed, and culturally engaged and that shape and maintain a dominant worldview. It is these institutions and the identities they help create that perpetuate negative emotions. Anger is thus sometimes promoted as an end state if the originating cause is worthy. Peter McLaren and Petar Jandrić (2020) advocate for a “revolutionary critical rage pedagogy” (p. 1). Patricia White (2012) examines arguments about political anger and civic education and concludes “that a democracy cannot dispense with political anger,” which “has a vital role to play in protecting things of value.” She also recommends that “[s]chools and teachers . . . should not attempt to extirpate political anger” (p. 47). This is not merely a philosophical stance; some school curricula and teaching materials encourage political and social anger. McLaren explains that “educators need to wage nothing less than war in the interest of the sacredness of human life, collective dignity or the wretched of the earth, and the right to live in peace and harmony” (1997, p. 13).

In an article with the enticing title, “What Most People Don’t Know About Anger,” psychotherapist and author of *The Dance of Anger* (Lerner, 2009a) Harriet Lerner (2009b) points out:

[A]nger is not just a “bad” or destructive human emotion. Rather, it is an essential source of power and strength. It can give us the courage to speak out and take a stand, or simply to identify that something is not right.

It is this necessary self-assertion and political analysis that critical theorists are interested in protecting. As Malcolm X (1990) observed, “Usually when people are sad, they do not do anything. They just cry over their condition. But when they get *angry*, they bring about change” (p. 107). As Bell Hooks (1995) ponders:

. . . it seems that Malcolm X’s passionate ethical commitment to justice catalyzed his rage. That rage was not altered by shifts in his thinking about white folks, racial integration, etc. It is the clear defiant articulation of that rage that continues to set Malcolm X apart from contemporary black thinkers and leaders who feel that “rage” has no place in the anti-racist struggle. These leaders are often more concerned about their dialogues with white folks. Their repression of rage (if and when they feel it) and their silencing of the rage of other black people are the sacrificial offerings they make to gain the ear of white listeners. . . . To perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, white folks have colonized black Americans, and a part of that colonizing process has been teaching us to repress our rage, to never make them the targets of any anger we feel about racism. Most black people internalize this message well. And though many of us were taught that the repression of our rage was necessary to stay alive in the days before racial integration, we now know that one can be exiled forever from the promise of economic well-being if that rage is not permanently silenced. (p. 13)

Many empirical studies have shown that anger can be a crucial motivator for taking social action to redress injustice (e.g., Iyer et al., 2007; Lotz et al., 2010; Vitagliano & Barnett, 2003; Wakslak et al., 2007; Webster et al., 2022). These studies focus on social injustice or “third-party” issues and “empathetic anger,” rather than on personal issues, although these can certainly be related. A 2002 study by Tafra and colleagues found that 40% of a community sample of 93 people reported positive long-term effects of angry episodes, compared with 36% that reported neutral outcomes and 25% that reported negative long-term outcomes. From a critical perspective, the angry person has to take practical action against threats in the home, at work, and in the community and world, and work to right wrongs, in the full despairing knowledge that people and systems can be disappointing.

Anger in Peace and Mindfulness Education

Anger is a big topic in both peace education and the related area of mindfulness education. In the field of peace and conflict studies, there are often considerable differences about the level of analysis or the “location” of peacemaking that scholars and practitioners focus upon and thus how critical personal emotions like anger are. In other words, sometimes peace work can be understood procedurally and devoid of emotions; for example, some peace education focuses on interactions among groups, communities, or nations, separate from individuals. To a large degree, the level of analysis and degree of anger or emotionality that scholars or practitioners consider is based on their respective disciplinary training. International relations, and more specifically scholarship on human rights, just war, and conflict theories, all emphasize formal peacemaking initiatives, and macro-political processes (not

emotions) are primary. Peace education literature in religion and psychology, by contrast, focuses more on personal emotions and micro-level interactions, and anger is significant.

For example, although the American Friend Service Committee (AFSC, 2002) Peace Education program includes the political goal “exploring peaceful alternatives to war and violence,” its *first goal* is “understanding the root cause of war and violence,” a cause that is neither political nor structural; it is understood to be *personal*, spiritual, and psychological. For these peace educators, the central global “problems” begin with human emotional responses; in contrast, for international relations academics, liberal theorists, and critical theorists, the central global problems are primarily rooted in macro-political and economic structures. For example, McLaren (2013) explains that for Paulo Freire, “understanding the alienation of human labor is the skeleton key that unlocks the boneyard of capitalism and makes it vulnerable for transformation into its opposite—a world of economic, social, cultural, racial, sexual and gender equality” (p. 67). In critical theory, and to some extent in liberal theory, pain and social conflict can be eliminated through correct social and economic engineering or formally mediating conflicting interests. Both critical and liberal worldviews accept conflict as a given. For liberal cosmopolitans, the central global problems are political, and solutions can be found within existing legal and cultural systems of jurisprudence and conflict resolution.

Peace education approaches like these that de-emphasize the importance of dealing with an individual’s feelings have been critiqued. For example, Clarke-Habibi (2005) questions whether critical and liberal acceptance of conflict makes sense as the normative basis for peace education. She points out:

As currently practiced, most programs of peace education adopt conflict as the normative basis for their theoretical frameworks and pedagogical methodologies. Participants’ essential message is that they ought to accept conflict as inevitable and learn to maximize what benefits they can acquire. Nevertheless, if peace education is intended to result in a qualitative transformation in the perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of both individuals and societies, such that citizens voluntarily choose peace-based behaviors, goals, and policies over conflict-based ones, then the adoption of conflict as the normative platform for such education represents a considerable conceptual contradiction. (p. 37)

Emotion- and person-focused peace educators are less utopian about reducing conflict and instead assume that anger and pain are central to the human condition, and no social or democratic utopia can eliminate them. Emotion- and person-focused peace educators typically feature neither a critical structural analysis of culture and power nor an optimistic acritical analysis of law, culture, and power.

Historically, in schools in the United States, the anger management and processing aspect of peace education was typically limited, whereas in adult education settings, understanding anger management when promoting nonviolent social change was central. Perhaps the most extensive training in effective anger was done at Highlander Folk School, which trained many thousands of labor and civil rights activists over

decades. Angering and unjust situations were clarified. The need to acknowledge anger when planning social action and manage anger during protests and actions was paramount. Before the civil rights movement began, Rosa Parks; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Ralph Abernathy; and many other future leaders were trained in nonviolent action at Highlander Folk School by Myles Horton (Longo, 2005; Tellado, 2012). More recently, Martha Nussbaum (2016) cautioned that uncontrolled anger threatens democratic discourse and institutions while recognizing that nonviolent anger is necessary to motivate social action.

In terms of its theoretical foundations, emotion- and person-focused approaches to anger in contemporary peace education draw from two sources, spirituality and psychology. Peace, anger reduction, and nonviolence education, focusing on the individual, draws heavily from spiritual traditions, most particularly Christianity (especially Quakerism and Catholic liberation theology) and Buddhism, and to a lesser extent from psychology and psychotherapy (Germer et al., 2013; Zelizer & Cui, 2012). The mindfulness branch of peace education originates in the intersection of contemporary Buddhist studies and psychoanalysis, and many of the leaders, including John Welwood (2006, 2014) and Jon Kornfield (2008), are both Buddhists and therapists. Considerable attention is given to psychology in Buddhism, which offers insights on sensation, perception, emotion, motivation, cognition, mind, and consciousness (De Silva, 2000). “Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned” is a saying attributed to Buddha. If emotional inflaming occurs, what is needed first in a mindfulness-based intervention (MBI) from the Buddhist tradition is a pause for the active cultivation of mindfulness (Chodron, 2001; Dalai Lama, 1997; Das, 2008; Hanh, 2011; Leifer, 1999; Thurman, 1998).

Mindful awareness and attention to the present moment allow for the capacity to reflect on anger so that one notices mistaken anger and can be attentive to the related emotions and correct response. This process requires developing the ability to resolve anger, fear, and conflict; bring peace and justice to interpersonal relationships; and explicitly discuss political relationships and problems. Mindfulness peace education focuses primarily on developing the ability to respond to both personal and political issues with nonviolence and compassion, although political issues are rarely directly addressed. The focus is so heavily on personal psychology that the mindfulness-based peace education literature implicitly devalues social action. Anger is often mistakenly placed in opposition to love, compassion, and morality among Buddhist mindfulness teachers.

Reconceptualizing Anger Within a Theory of Emotional Ecology

As the above review suggests, responding well to anger is highly complex because it can be rooted in political, economic, and cultural contexts, including families and

schools, and anger requires multiple distinctive capacities for its resolution. Anger occurs within emotional ecologies. In the remainder of this article, I outline a new theory of anger within emotional ecology.

Emotional ecology is the emotional consequence of the relationships among living organisms, including humans, and their biological, material, and cultural worlds. Just as is true for physical ecosystems, different levels of emotional ecology, from the family to global systems, are all connected. Living systems offer both structured materiality and a lived affective experience. Our emotions do not arise as individual experiences. The emotional options available to us are rooted in the dynamics of family, school, community, nation, and global emotional ecology (Heilman, 2021).

For this reason, an angry student is not the sole generator of their experience. Anger is commonplace because justice is a human need. Humans are moral beings who naturally make judgments on issues of justice and fairness. When a person is exposed to injustice as a chronic condition, it is traumatic. Given the reach of global information about unjust acts, chronic exposure to angering responses are common.

Further, and more immediately, the acceleration of human and ecosystem exploitation of neoliberal capitalism has meant that injustices such as lack of health care, inadequate wages to pay bills, the unfair judiciary system, and violent policing are common traumas for many people. In the same way that physical ecosystems carry the burden of past harms, so do emotional ecosystems. Trauma is often accumulated throughout a lifetime and transmitted to coming generations. Traumatic anger can develop from chronic affective injustice or as an aspect of a traumatic event in which fear dominates. A trauma is an experience that is stored in the body. Implicit memory and trauma can structure future feelings about experiences of the world without conscious processing (Archer & Mills, 2019; van der Kolk, 2014). Racism is an example of a traumatic experience, an injustice that Black and Brown people will inevitably experience, so their emotional ecology entails this injustice experience, affecting emotional health just like physical ecology inevitably affects health. One reaction to the trauma of chronic injustice is chronic anger and a heightened embodied sensitivity to wrongs. Another reaction is the opposite—hopelessness and apathy. Anger is thus best understood not just as a personal experience, but also as an emotion that results from the “emotional ecology” of living in global societies and local communities.

Anger is confounding because it has been fundamentally misunderstood or differently understood in many of the traditions mentioned previously. This review has revealed that anger *has multiple dimensions*, and different theorists tend to focus on one aspect of it, to the detriment of a more complex and nuanced understanding. The close multidisciplinary study of anger suggests that anger is the *simultaneous* experience of threat and moral judgment; it entails both a judgment and an emotional response; it occurs within an existing emotional ecology. Anger is the “dominant emotional response” to perceptions of injustice (Clayton, 1992; Marcus, 2000; Mikula et al., 1998, p. 770). Anger is a response to a perceived gap between what is occurring and what should be occurring. Anger is often related to implicit memory and past

traumatic experiences of injustice. Therefore, anger education for emotional growth and political change needs to rely on personal reflection and contextualization within the family, school, communities, ethics, democracy, and social justice. This approach undoes the boundaries between the seemingly separate aspects of anger experiences—including the public, the economic, the private, and the personal—and acknowledges the seemingly distinct moral, political, and emotional boundaries within the self. The term “political” here refers to things that are unfair or unjust but still ethical and thus subject to political action and policy. Even relational interpersonal issues have a political dimension because mistreating others or doing harm always has educational, legal, and social implications and solutions. This can even include how families, couples, and friends treat each other and the extent to which our political system supports emotional and mental health. In this new view, anger thus includes the following three distinctive, experiential features:

1. Ethical response: A *moral judgment* (i.e., “this is wrong,”) is a categorically good human impulse. This impulse can be misapplied, however. The accuracy of moral judgment can vary greatly.
2. Emotional response: An *unpleasant, threatened feeling state* that can be rooted in the immediate moment, or it might also be related to past experiences in conscious or implicit memory. Reflecting on the sources of the feeling is helpful and necessary. Also, knowing practical strategies to improve an upset reaction reduces the feeling of threat.
3. Action response: A *will toward action* or a feeling of both needing to and doing something. This will can be inappropriately acted upon or inappropriately ignored and suppressed if the moral judgment and feeling states are not clarified and addressed.

Anger includes a primal ethical response. Anger is often the *simultaneous* experience of emotional threat, ethical judgment, and empowerment to take action. As such, anger has both political and personal dimensions. It always exists within a material and emotional ecosystem.

Distinguishing Justified and Unjustified Types of Anger

A vital implication of the three dimensions just described is that appropriately responding to anger requires decision-making on the origin of the anger feeling. Is the anger justified or unjustified, and is action warranted? As Clore et al. (1993) have noted, “Perceptions of blameworthiness (attributions of blame) are an important element in an emotion we call anger, but they are not important in another anger-like emotion that we call frustration” (p. 60). The formal “specification of anger is disapproving of someone else’s blameworthy action and being displeased about the related undesirable event” (p. 69). Prinz (2004) argues that emotions are perceptions of aroused states of the body or gut reactions. Their content is then represented by “propositional

descriptions” that we are familiar with but that may be inaccurate. As Lazarus (1991) describes it, anger is a judgment that the agent has suffered “a demeaning offense against me and mine” (p. 222). If the negative situation is judged to be controllable (i.e., due to choice or dispositional factors), then Averill (1982) claims people tend to feel anger.

However, if adverse outcomes are due to causes that people perceive as uncontrollable (i.e., situational factors), people tend to feel pity or despair and not anger. Consistent with Averill (1982), therefore, the most central characteristic of anger is that it entails both a moral judgment and an emotional response, and it entails both distress and hope for resolution. Thus, the anger crisis is feeling the gap between what happened and what should have happened. Although this depicts the anger experience, what a person does and feels next in response to anger varies enormously. A range of possible negative and positive emotional and moral components of anger are clarified in Table 1.

Given its diverse components, anger is thus better understood as a multidimensional process rather than a single experience. This experiential complexity is consistent with the complexity described earlier that neuroscientists encounter when trying to capture and define anger physiologically. This does not mean anger is several different things; it means that anger has multiple distinctive components. Anger is a complex interplay of *more than one psychological and emotional experience*. Further, as the review below clarifies, what can be usefully and legitimately considered angry does not always include the same experiential elements. Finally, the experience of the components of anger may arise in different ways or in a different order for people in different situations.

Recognizing this complexity, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2015) details three distinct approaches to addressing anger—suppressing, calming, and expressing:

Anger can be suppressed, and then converted or redirected. This happens when you hold in your anger, stop thinking about it, and focus on something positive. The aim is to inhibit or suppress your anger and convert it into more constructive behavior. The danger in this type of response is that if it isn’t allowed outward expression, your anger can turn inward—on yourself. Anger turned inward may cause hypertension, high blood pressure, or depression. [In addition, unexpressed anger can create other problems. It can lead to pathological expressions of anger, such as passive-aggressive behavior (getting back at people indirectly, without telling them why, rather than confronting them head-on) or a personality that seems perpetually cynical and hostile.

Another choice is calming and then expressing anger. This means not just controlling your outward behavior, but also controlling your internal responses, taking steps to lower your heart rate, calm yourself down, and let the feelings subside . . . Expressing your angry feelings in an assertive—not aggressive—manner is the healthiest way to express anger. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs are, and how to get them met, without hurting others.

Table 1. The Moral Components of Anger.

| Anger entails a primal morality, which is the ethical perception of “wrong or wronged.” | |
|--|---|
| Negative | Positive |
| Distress: an emotional experience of harm, distress, and/or fear. | Hope: A righteous emotional experience of affirming the good. |
| Unschooling Response | Schooled Mindful Response |
| I am so angered about this. I feel just terrible. I am going to try to stop feeling mad. I feel sorry for myself. I don't think it was fair. I am going to try to stop feeling sad. I am so angry. Nothing will help. I have to forget about this. | I am so angered about this. I feel so strongly because I believe in decency. I feel sorry for this world and its humans. I am so upset that it is this way but I can bring insight to the situation. I treat my own and others' sorrow with care. I accept an imperfect world. It is joyous to affirm and work for the good. I work to heal suffering and trauma |

However, these three choices, delineated by the APA, are overly simplistic, given the ethical, emotional, and efficacy components of anger, each of which can entail different responses.

For example, according to the review on anger above, one or more of the following diverse negative or positive outcomes can occur; none is inevitable. First, a physical experience of aggression for defense or a verbal outburst can occur without an actual physical reaction. Second, repression of anger and bad feelings may swiftly follow anger. Third, a person may also deny the truth of their ethical judgment that led to anger. Fourth, they may not believe in the possibility of a better situation, and so despair may follow anger. Finally, persistent feelings of victimization, fear, despair, hopelessness, or hatred are common.

In addition, there can be positive outcomes after anger. These can include a reflective reassessment of the factual nature of the situation that caused anger. After anger, one might experience an increase in insight into the complexity of the angering situation and may feel morally positive emotions such as hope and compassion for those involved, possibly including perpetrators of harm. Local or civic action to redress wrongs or improve a situation can be a result of anger. And finally, anger may lead a person to take action to heal personal and collective trauma.

Distinguishing Justified and Unjustified Degrees of Anger

It is also possible, and perhaps common, for anger reactions to be justified but disproportionate to the proximal cause. Once again, this is not unusual because an anger reaction can derive from an implicit memory of past traumatic injustices or a fear. Anger can be triggered by an event but also be trauma-driven. Although anger

is a normal, functional, primary moral response alerting us to something external, *continued* negative emotions can foster self-harm or encourage immoral exaggerated aggression toward others or lead to passivity and hopelessness. It requires effort and considerable psychological-emotional education to understand that the adverse external events to which we are morally altered in anger do not have to dictate internal emotions, nor is the initial judgment of what to do always the best course of action.

Anger reactions are often highly psychologically and politically complex because a new situation that angers tends to “trigger” other sources of anger that a person has not processed, mastered, or resolved either practically or emotionally. As Philippe et al. (2011) explain,

Both external and internal cues—specific situations, people, and contexts encountered in everyday life—trigger specific autobiographical memories that are encoded with features related to these situations, people, or contexts (e.g., the same location, a physical resemblance to a significant other, an evaluative context). This triggering mechanism is a continual process of which people are typically unaware (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Roediger, 1990). (p. 1280)

Past angering and traumatic events can often lead a person to perceive ambiguous or neutral stimuli as threatening (van der Kolk, 2014) and can increase a person’s emotional reactivity or anger response disproportionate to the circumstance at hand (Altena et al., 2016; Becerra & Campitelli, 2013; Infurna et al., 2019). Tending to react disproportionately to circumstances is commonly known as having “triggers.” These are forms of trauma and can potentially be healed. As children or as adults, people can accumulate injustice and mistreatment experiences that create outsized anger reactions that feel fully “in the moment” but are not. The body and subconscious remember past harms even when the conscious mind does not. Calm, traumatic-free childhoods and emotional well-being are not common and are not equally distributed in society; those marginalized by race, class, gender, and other forms of social harm likely experience a more triggering emotional ecology. Relatedly, some people may underexperience anger as another coping mechanism and need anger to be drawn out. How this might work can be exemplified in a five-stage resolution model of anger.

The Five Stages of Anger Resolution

There are numerous anger reduction instructional programs that teach students both thought- and behavior-based steps toward monitoring their thoughts and feelings about situations as a means for controlling their angry behaviors (Blum, 2001; Brophy, 1996; Goldstein, 1999; Kellner et al., 2002; O’Donnell & White, 2001; Phillips-Hershey & Kanagy, 1996; Robinson et al., 2002; Tamaki, 1994; Wilde, 2002). However, these programs do not include educational reading, learning, and conversation to understand the complexity and nature of the angering situation and triggering antecedents. Nor do they consider causes of anger to have political or civic dimensions

or potentially be rooted in past traumatic experiences. Instead, anger is theorized as primarily personal and immediate and is generally viewed as pathological rather than a potential ethical and political resource.

In the five-stage model proposed here, anger resolution steps entail both civic and personal dimensions of anger and are trauma-informed. The following approach includes insights into the complexity of anger detailed in this article. It integrates insights and recommendations from the American Psychological Association, “anger management” programs (Larson, 1992), mindfulness and peace education theorists (Chodrun, 2001; Dalai Lama, 1997; Das, 2004, 2008; Hanh, 2011; Kornfield, 2008; Thurman, 1998; Welwood, 2006, 2014), theorists of politically engaged Buddhism (Maull, 2005; Moon, 2004), theorists of nonviolent education and social change (see Ansbro, 2000; Bartkowski, 2013; Glass, 1996; Gregg, 2018; Horton, 2003; Sharp, 2005), and psychological researchers who stress the social benefits of anger and moral outrage (e.g., Montada & Schneider, 1989; Vitaglione & Barnett, 2003; Wakslak et al., 2007). The transformation of anger into nonviolent action includes five distinctive educational steps: mindfulness, compassion, insight, action, and a therapeutic response (or MCIAT).

1. The mindfulness response to anger: Notice anger has occurred. Be aware that you have made an ethical judgment and that your emotions are aroused. This will signal the need to become calm and develop understanding before taking moral action. Regain equanimity. Try to return to an emotionally and physically neutral state. This process can take minutes or weeks.
2. The compassion response to anger: Cultivate compassion toward everyone involved in the situation, including compassion toward yourself. You may need to imagine wrongdoers as children or victims of poor education or parenting to be able not to condemn the person or people angering you. It is helpful to categorically view “bad” people as mistaken, undeveloped, uneducated, or damaged people and thus potentially view them with compassion. Regularly bringing to mind a collaged, drawn, or imagined picture of the person as a toddler in diapers can help reprocess and calm feelings of victimization. Importantly, this step creates a stance of moral maturity compared to perpetrators of angering acts, which can relieve repetitive ruminating about feelings of vulnerability. Because anger includes a visceral and primal defensive emotional quality, being “the bigger person” reduces unpleasant feelings of smallness and victimization. This step develops a wise, empowering perspective about what makes people hurt others. This is not an action step with the angering people. It is important to protect yourself and maintain boundaries practically because anger often means you are at risk of future harm.
3. The insight response to anger: Use reflection, reading, learning, and conversation to understand the complexity and nature of the situation. This step includes understanding the situation’s psychological, social, economic, historical, institutional, and emotional nature. Learning about the dynamics of narcissism,

sociopathy, and Machiavellianism on the personal level, and oppression, racism, and exploitation on a societal level are empowering. Understanding the sociological and historical situations in which people become mistaken, misinformed, undeveloped, uneducated, or damaged, and thus viewing the angering actions of “bad” people and groups with complex intellectual insight, is both practically and emotionally useful. In school, curriculum on bullying and racism should be explicitly connected to social-emotional learning.

4. The action response to anger: Explore actions you could take that affect change. The previous three steps are not action-oriented or civic because they need not involve others. In the action step, work to understand real-world *resolutions* of the situation according to your highest moral principles. Seek information, discuss perspectives, and plan ways to improve the situation with others. This is not action to directly change the person or people who did wrong but instead to do something within your control. This could be reporting a bully in a school or a workplace, reporting to an official or government office, joining a social action group, making plans to remove yourself from interactions with a person, or changing jobs. Of note, having “no contact” or minimal interaction with an abusive person or context is recommended. Then, with self-protection, compassion, righteousness, and reflection, decide what needs to be done (or not done) to prevent others and yourself from experiencing further harm. Deciding there was an angry overreaction is possible, too. Being a good citizen in response to anger can thus range from seeking or offering an apology to reporting abuse to participating in a large-scale political movement, or all of these.
5. The therapeutic response to anger: Explore actions you could take that reveal and heal and the complexity and acute pain of the emotional trauma that reverberates beyond the immediate issue. Healing trauma includes intergenerational trauma, which is transmitted through attachment relationships where the parent or guardian has experienced trauma, and it has significant impacts upon individuals across the lifespan, including a predisposition to accumulate further trauma. For example, it is common to come across children who are victims of abuse, whose grandparents and parents were also victims of abuse, and it is common for these people to have been traumatized with both anger and fear by things like war, dislocation, deaths, racism, poverty, and social marginalization (Infurna et al., 2019). Reprocessing anger trauma therapeutically means creating a new intellectual and emotional embodied reaction.

A trauma response is an evolutionary adaptation that affects brain chemistry. As Lisa Firestone (2021) explains, trauma memories are often implicit because:

trauma floods our brain with cortisol, the stress hormone, which shuts down the [frontal cortex] part of our brain that encodes memories and makes them explicit. Our implicit memories can be like invisible forces in our lives, impacting us in powerful ways.

It is thus often crucial to process traumatic anger reactions to threat in a way that addresses the body and involves implicit memory. Trauma therapies thus fall into one of two distinct categories: top-down cognitively oriented approaches and bottom-up embodied and emotional processing approaches; both are recommended (van der Kolk, 2014). For example, the compassion process can also foster a new physiological embodied reaction and a new cognitive understanding.

One bottom-up embodied approach is eye movement, desensitization, and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, which can be effective when integrated with mindfulness techniques (van der Kolk, 2014). With EMDR, the therapist walks the client through eight phases: history taking, preparation, assessment, desensitization (of the trauma reaction), installation (of a positive belief or reaction), body scan (with focus on positive reactions), closure, and reevaluation. During desensitization in EMDR, the patient is asked to connect to negative thoughts and feelings like anger while visually tracking an object or a light as it moves back and forth (Shapiro, 2017) and replace trauma-triggered feelings with positive feelings. In this therapeutic situation, studies show that implicit memories associated with the negative feelings often arise and are processed and replaced with minimal and optional talking. The tracking eye movements, like rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, are believed to “reshape memory by increasing the imprint of emotionally relevant information while helping irrelevant material fade away” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 262). It is possible that EMDR can resolve how a new anger reaction is tied in implicit memory to past experiences with injustice.

Another body-based approach is emotional freedom techniques (EFT), often referred to simply as “tapping.” With this approach, rhythms are tapped on the hands, head, face, and collarbones. At the same time, memories of a traumatic event are reframed, and ruminating anger is reduced (Kwak et al., 2020). Body-based traumatic anger therapy can also be more physical. It can ask clients to do bursts of intense exercise or punch the air while recalling an angering incident; this is intended to help “teach” the body that it is responding to and surviving the emotion. This is called sensorimotor psychotherapy (SP), and it facilitates the processing of unasimulated sensorimotor reactions to trauma. In sensorimotor psychotherapy “it becomes possible to address the more primitive, automatic and involuntary functions of the brain that underlie traumatic and post-traumatic responses” (Ogden et al., 2006, p. 5); for example, reenacting fight-or-flight body reactions in a safe context like exercise therapy creates a bodily feeling of mastery during threat (van der Kolk, 2014).

Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research

The emotional ecology approach outlined in this article honors the interplay between the person and the environment to capture the complicity and complexity of anger. Productive anger education helps students “work” through each of the steps listed above. Anger is complex, and effectively resolving anger is often surprisingly tricky, especially because many angering situations require changes in the self, family

relationships, the workplace, and the government. For students with traumatic anger, the involvement of mental health professionals is likely to be necessary; but from a perspective of emotional ecology, therapy alone is insufficient. Social action is necessary to change the interconnected pathological emotional ecologies of the home, school, workplace, and polity. The unpleasant feelings associated with anger can be especially difficult to release when the problems that cause the original anger seem difficult or perhaps impossible to fix in the world. As John Dewey (1894/1971) explains:

Everyone knows how the smart and burn of the feeling of injustice increases with the feeling of impotency; it is, for example, when [political or social] strikes are beginning to fail that violence from anger or revenge, as distinct from sheer criminality, sets in. (p. 184)

The problem can move between, “how do I address this problem in the world?” (action, step 4) to “how do I address the problem of how bad I feel?” (steps 2 and 5) to “why is this happening?” (insight, step 3). All of these elements need attention.

Further, compassion is often difficult to muster. It requires first a dispassionate acceptance that humans are flawed. Anger responses also often derive from more than one stimulus. As the APA (2015) points out:

You could be angry at a specific person (such as a coworker or supervisor) or event (a traffic jam, a canceled flight), or your anger could be caused by worrying or brooding about your problems. Memories of traumatic or enraging events can also trigger angry feelings.

Further, people can be angry about a situation and their ongoing, suffering response to a situation. Anger often builds because one is upset to be in pain. As internal emotions rise, it becomes even more challenging to be mindful and neutral and operate with the compassion and insight needed to take effective action to improve the external situation. An essential aspect of the “compassion” step of anger resolution is to learn that unpleasant events are not in control of personal behavior and to reject personal misery. This is difficult. It requires the continual redirection of thoughts and feelings reframing the situation or therapy. Educators and counselors can help students learn how to do this. This step requires self-care as well. Thich Nhat Hanh (2011) suggests this way of thinking about anger:

Imagine a mother getting angry with her baby and hitting him when he cries. That mother does not know that she and her baby are one. We are mothers of our anger, and we have to help our baby, our anger, not fight and destroy it. Our anger is us, and our compassion is also us. To meditate does not mean to fight.

Even trained conflict mediators and contemplatives confess that they sometimes feel the crisis of immediate danger and the lingering, ruminating anger pain that requires

therapy. In the educational and therapeutic phases described above, insight requires considerable pedagogy and therapy, and this needs to be rigorous, lifelong, and inclusive of communities.

The ability to make judgments about actions that are informed by compassion and reflection is also highly challenging. Martin Luther King, Jr., stressed the importance of releasing the negative feelings of anger while holding on to the capacity to engage in compassion-driven social change that the initial anger crisis inspired. King was especially aware of the importance of releasing anger, even when it seemed like justice was impossible. Only by productively channeling his anger, including the cultivation of the “compassion” step described above, and teaching others to channel anger into compassion, insight, and civic action, did King become an effective leader of a peaceful and successful civil rights struggle.

Explicit education and therapeutic interventions attend to both complex internal and complex external emotional ecology. This educational intervention seeks to develop students’ capacity to be reflective (steps 3–5 above) about the nature of the situations that “cause” anger. Students learn to understand individuals’ social, economic, historical, institutional, and emotional aspects of situations that anger them. A similar feeling can occur when we are wrong and when we are right. A similar feeling can occur when we should and should not take action. It is essential, therefore, that unhappiness with one’s own mistakes or the mistakes of others does not lead students or teachers to suppress or skip the often difficult and uncomfortable elements of fear, despair, compassion, and reflection in the first three steps and instead rush to judgment toward the action of step 4. In the face of injustice, punching somebody, suppressing the reality of a problem, and forgiving without action to prevent further harm are all common mistakes.

Justified anger always requires civic action to change something terrible that is happening. Students who are upset about social issues can be directed toward concrete ways to take action as citizens, not to feel merely helpless. Situational anger can also be a sign of unresolved traumatic anger, requiring a more personal response such as therapy. Also, both can be true. A student can overreact due to past trauma about something immediate that genuinely needs to change. Therefore, it is crucial not to suppress or skip the often difficult and uncomfortable elements of feeling angry that schools too often sanction. Formal instruction in calming down, developing compassion, and engaging in reflection to develop insight about upsetting situations and feelings helps students feel better and understand what political or personal actions, if any, are needed.

Importantly, incomplete or overly reductive theories of anger work to the significant detriment of individuals and the collective society. In the present theory, anger is a response to the distance between what is and what might be. It is a response to the *simultaneous perception* of problems and possibilities. Further, what is angering can be both situations “out there” in the world and rooted “inside” one’s experience of being in the world. Thus, anger resolution can refer both to concrete situations that could be improved (like injustice) and to the perception of the experience of situations that could be improved or healed. In the private sphere and classroom, anger is

sometimes too quickly left behind or suppressed, and in the public sphere, anger can be held for too long. When anger is justified but too quickly left behind, a person can remain victimized. When anger is held for too long without the offer of compassion and forgiveness, dispassionate judgment can be arrived at, but moral action often does not occur without revenge. Nonviolence has been referred to as a “third way”—one that is neither a passive acceptance of injustice nor a violent opposition to it, but instead, an active commitment to use nonviolent means (e.g., social action, civil disobedience, protests, and education) to resist evil and seek justice for those who are oppressed. The five steps described in this article are a peace-oriented and productive way to respond to anger that honors the emotional ecology of traumatic and intergenerational anger.

Areas for future research include studies on how students process anger that address the complexities of the five dimensions of anger resolution outlined here. Anger resolution has been studied in education contexts, but the focus has primarily been on the external display of anger and not on students’ emotional experience and intellectual understanding. Further research is needed. Future studies should span pre-K through adolescence and include the ways in which anger intersects with curricula. Research attention to the full range of child and adolescent development matters because younger students have been the primary research focus; only eight states have SEL standards extending from pre-K through grade 12 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021), and “SEL standards [are] much more prevalent within health education standards across K–12 settings” (Eklund et al., 2018). Research is also needed to conceptualize social-emotional learning about anger as it may emerge in disciplinary education like social studies and science; for example, students may experience anger about racism or climate change, and teachers need to be prepared to address this.

In addition, traumatic anger and toxic stress disproportionately impact students of color and those with other marginalized identities (Merrick et al., 2018), yet anger can be mediated in schools through policies and practices that restore safety and build relationships (Plumb et al., 2016). Future research must “prioritize resilience over risk, avoid the stigmatization of communities disproportionately impacted by trauma, and address the sociopolitical context of trauma” (Gherardi et al., 2020, p. 498). Finally, more research is also needed on how best to prepare teachers to be effective in social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practice related to anger. The therapeutic dimension of anger resolution requires trauma-informed teachers. As Pawlo et al. (2019) note:

For SEL programs to be trauma-informed, then, they must take into account that many learners are experiencing strong and overwhelming emotions that may be connected to an acute traumatic occurrence or ongoing chronic stressors, both of which will limit students’ information processing ability and social-emotional functioning. (p. 39)

Given the inherent complexity, teachers, social workers, and therapists must work together to address the emotional and political aspects of anger in education. Addressing our most painful and angering global challenges in all their complexity requires full

integration of the personal, educational, civic, and therapeutic dimensions of emotional ecology, and this worthy enterprise should inspire interdisciplinary dialogue and future research.

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