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Venting Anger: Third Party Targets and Responses

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Abstract

Two experiments investigated the effects of venting on anger. The first extended previous research positing that the target of venting (the person to whom anger is directed) is a critical determinant altering anger expression and anger. This experiment found that venting to particular targets (therapist, mediator, friend) increased anger as compared to not venting. The second experiment investigated the effects of different responses to venting (i.e., reinterpreting or reinforcing). This experiment found that responses that reinforce the anger-provoking behavior (emphasize internal and controllable causes) increase anger. Responses that reinterpret the anger-provoking behavior (emphasize external and uncontrollable causes) decrease anger. Interestingly, this pattern holds for offender respondents only. When the respondent is a third party, neither a reinterpreting nor a reinforcing response changes anger significantly. Limitations and practical implications are discussed.

Venting Advice and Research Findings

According to the American Heritage Dictionary (2008), to vent is "to express (one's thoughts or feelings, for example), especially forcefully." The term venting emerged from the Freudian hydraulic model of catharsis (Breuer & Freud, 1957). Freud believed that individuals needed to release pent-up emotions. He compared the anger inside an individual to the pressure of hot water inside a pipe. In order to keep the pipe (the person) from exploding due to the pressure of the hot steam (emotion), the pipe needed to vent (express emotion) and let out that steam.[1]

Many practical texts outlining the methods and routes to conflict resolution recommend venting anger as a way to successfully manage conflict and reduce anger in negotiations (Ury, 1993; Lee, 1995; Lewicki, Saunders, & Minton, 1999; Fisher & Shapiro, 2005).[2] For example, Fisher et al. (1991) assert that "one effective way to deal with people's anger, frustration, and other negative emotions is to help them release those feelings...People obtain psychological release through the simple process of recounting their grievances…Letting off steam may make it easier to talk rationally later" (p.31). Other authors concur that clearing the air and letting negotiators release their negative emotions, through a kind of catharsis, may produce a reduction in tension and hostility (Lewicki, Saunders, & Minton, 1999). This line of advice suggests that through venting one can return to a more rational and less emotional state and thus be more prepared to productively manage conflict.

Research spanning several decades, however, has found that expression of negative emotion does not necessarily lead to anger release. Many early studies found

strong evidence that venting can exacerbate anger (Hornberger, 1959; Berkowitz, Green & Macaulay, 1962; Buss, 1966; Wheeler & Caggiula, 1966; Ryan, 1970; Geen, Stonner, & Shope, 1975; Murray & Feshbach, 1978; for reviews see Geen & Quanty, 1977; Berkowitz, 1970). Also, more recent research has shown that venting can lead to negative behavioral consequences such as retaliation (Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999; Bushman, 2002). Furthermore, recent research has shown negative effects of anger and anger expression in negotiation contexts. Feeling or expressing anger during negotiations affects the negotiator's own behavior (intrapersonal effects) and that of the opponent (interpersonal effects). Specifically, it has been found that anger and anger expression may lead to detrimental effects such as a breakdown in negotiations, less likelihood of securing a deal, less interest in future interactions, fewer joint gains, less favorable impressions, and less profitable outcomes (Allred, Mallozzi, Matsui, & Raia, 1997; Friedman, Anderson, Brett, Olekalns, Goates, & Lisco, 2004; Adler, Rosen, & Silverstein, 1998; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004; Kopelman, Rosette, & Thompson, 2006; for review see Van Kleef, van Dijk, Steinel, Harinck & van Beest, 2008). [3]

Thus, based on empirical data, it can be concluded that the hydraulic model of venting does not work. However, anger remains a critical variable present in conflict and negotiations and having appropriate prescriptions for how to deal with anger is valuable interpersonally and professionally. A model of venting, proposed by Parlamis et al., (2008), provides new territory to explore on the venting front.

Reappraisal Model vs. Hydraulic Model

Researchers propose that in order for venting to change the felt emotion of anger, a cognitive change or a reappraisal of the anger-provoking event is necessary; simply recounting grievances forcefully without cognitive change will not alter anger (Mallick and McCandless, 1966; Parke, Ewall and Slaby, 1972; Bohart, 1980; Berkowitz and Heimer, 1989). This line of reasoning is consistent with an attribution appraisal approach to emotions. According to attribution appraisal theorists (e.g., Averill, 1982; Roseman, 1984; Weiner, 1985; Smith & Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994), distinct other-directed emotions arise when individuals attribute a cause to an encounter or event; they make an appraisal of the situation. Specific emotions result from that appraisal.[4] An emotion, such as anger, has been shown to have specific appraisals associated with it (Weiner, 1985; 1995). Studies have found that anger results from attributing the cause of a negative event to something internal to and controllable by another person (see Averill, 1982; Weiner, Grahm & Chandler, 1982; Nickel, 1974; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Internal and controllable attributions are considered attributions of responsibility.

Attribution appraisal research has found that further cognitive processing of an anger-provoking event that includes attributional content and reappraisal of the anger-provoking situation may lead to anger change (Weiner, 1985, 1995; Averill, 1982; Roseman, 1984; Smith & Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994).

An attribution appraisal view of venting appears more appropriate than the hydraulic model put forth by Freud and embraced by the lay community. The Freudian view, research into which has not yielded results corroborating its intuitive appeal, calls for aggressive and forceful expression of emotion in order to provoke catharsis, while the

attribution reappraisal view predicts that angry venting, using blaming language, will exacerbate anger and not eliminate it.

Parlamis, Allred, and Block (2008) found evidence to suggest that a reappraisal model is more appropriate than a hydraulic model. They found that internal and controllable attributions (attributions of responsibility) made during venting were significantly correlated with post-venting anger. In other words, the greater the blaming language (attributions of responsibility) used during venting the greater the post-venting anger. Additionally, they found that the target of venting (i.e., the person to whom we vent) plays a key role in how we vent (i.e., with greater or lesser attributions of responsibility). Venting to a third party (someone who had no personal knowledge or involvement in the anger-provoking event) increased attributions of responsibility as compared to venting to an offender (the person with whom one is angry) directly and the pattern for anger was the same, higher when venting to third party than when venting to offender, however, it did not reach significance. Results did confirm previous research findings such that venting to a third party significantly increased anger as compared to not venting. However, diverging somewhat from previous findings, venting to the offender did not show significant differences as compared to not venting. It is important to note that neither target condition (third party or offender) produced a decreased level of anger as compared to not venting. This provides evidence against the Freudian model. According to that model, a decrease in anger should be found over not venting.

Study 1

Very early research on venting focused peripherally on the target of venting and suggested the importance of investigating this variable to better understand anger

reduction in conflict situations (Thibaut & Coules (1952) Worchel,1957; Rosenbaum and deCharms, 1960; Hokenson & Burgess, 1962; Kahn 1966; Duncan & Konecni,1975). Study 1 extends Parlamis et al.'s (2008) research where the target of venting was the central focus. While they looked at attributions and anger when venting was directed at a third party (a friend), they did not investigate other important third parties that are involved in conflict situations—specifically, mediators or therapists (two third-party targets that are commonly associated with conflict). This research investigates the change in attributions and anger when venting is directed toward a therapist, a mediator, or a friend and compares these conditions with a no venting control.

This research proposes to replicate the findings of Parlamis et al. (2008) such that venting to a third party will result in greater anger as compared to not venting. In addition, this research will suggest some nuances across third parties that may impact attributions and anger.

Parlamis et al. (2008) propose that "venting may be used strategically, as a way to communicate motives, claim value or persuade the other party. Differences in expression may indicate purposeful differences intended to manipulate the other party to whom the venting is directed" (p.22). The idea that emotional expression can be used strategically during negotiations and be influenced by negotiation goals has received much attention in the past few years (e.g., Kopelman, Rosette, & Thompson, 2006; for review see Van Kleef, van Dijk, Steinel, Harinck, & van Beest, 2008). It could be argued that when venting to each of these third parties (therapist, mediator, or friend), individuals have different goals and motivations that influence their expression. For example, when venting to a mediator the goal could be to persuade with logic and reason. Since the

mediator will hear from all parties involved in the conflict the most tempered, rational, and direct recounting of grievances may be strategically appropriate. This might lead to less blaming language and more factual accounts, which would not reinforce attributions of responsibility and would not increase anger over not venting.

When venting to a friend you may want to gain approval for your anger or validation and so vent using blaming language and angry statements, leading to greater anger than not venting. Finally, in the presence of a therapist, the goal might be to talk about your problems with no inhibition or restraint. This is a direct test of the classic Freudian paradigm and, according to the appraisal model of venting put forth by Parlamis et al.(2008), would yield the greatest blaming language and anger as compared to not venting.

Hypothesis 1: Venting to friend and therapist will lead to greater attributions and anger than venting to a mediator.

Hypothesis 2: Venting to a therapist or friend will lead to greater anger as compared to not venting whereas venting to a mediator will not lead to greater anger over not venting.

Method

Participants and Experimental Design

Participants were 88 undergraduate and graduate students (53 men and 33 women, two not reporting). The age of participants ranged from 17 to 40 with 66 percent of participants between ages 17 and 24. Participants were given cookies in exchange for participation. Seven participants were excluded from analyses because of incomplete

questionnaires or illegible writing, not following directions or discussing a conflict that was already resolved. The final sample consisted of 81 participants.

The experiment was a between-subjects design where participants were randomly assigned to one of four venting conditions: friend, therapist, mediator, and no venting. Attributions of responsibility and anger were the main dependent variables. Participants were assigned to the experimental conditions according to a double-blind procedure in which neither the participants nor the experimenter knew which condition each participant was assigned. The experimental groups ranged in size from 19 to 22 participants.

Procedure

Participants were presented with a questionnaire packet containing several parts: an anger recall task, a venting task, and a questionnaire. On the first page of the packet was the stimulated recall procedure that asked participants to recall the most recent time when they were involved in a conflict that made them angry and continues to make them angry now when they think of the incident. They were asked to spend several minutes thinking about the event. A similar anger-instigation/elicitation method has been shown to reliably produce anger in subjects (Murray & Feshbach, 1978; Allred, Parlamis, & Chiongbian, 1999; Parlamis, Allred, & Block, 2008).

Manipulation of the Target of Venting

After spending a few minutes recalling the anger-provoking incident, subjects were asked to write a letter to someone about the incident. Specifically, they were asked to write a letter to a mediator (someone uninvolved in the conflict but who will act as a go-between); or to a therapist (someone to whom you talk about your problems); or to a

friend (someone who did not have any direct/personal involvement in the incident) venting about the incident. They were asked to write the letter as if they were truly going to send it. After completing the letters, participants were told to turn the page and complete the questionnaire that followed.

Dependent Measures

The dependent variables were attributions of responsibility and post-venting anger. Attributions of responsibility were measured qualitatively in the form of a venting letter. The experimenter established a coding scheme prior to analysis specifying level of detail, types of words, phrases, or sentences to identify as well as a rating method with examples. Similar data analysis methods have been suggested by Miles and Huberman (1997) and were used by Parlamis et al. (2008). Specifically, raters listed and logged references to causes of the offender's behavior. These causes of transgressions were assessed in terms of Locus and Controllability attributions. Locus refers to the extent to which the cause of a behavior is due to some internal reason (e.g., selfishness, thoughtlessness) or some external reason (e.g., weather, problems at work). Controllability refers to the extent a behavior is due to one's volitional control or beyond an individual's power or influence. Raters used a nine-point scale for each attribution (Locus: 1 highly external to 9 highly internal; Control: 1 highly uncontrollable to 9 highly controllable). These scores were averaged for each rater into a single rating of "attributions of responsibility" and a composite measure of attributions of responsibility was obtained by averaging the ratings of the raters. An interrater Intraclass Correlation was obtained for the raters (attributions α=.79).

Quantitative data. The questionnaire following the stimulated recall portion of the study constituted the post-venting measure. The questionnaire comprised items that asked subjects to rate to what extent they felt anger and other general demographic questions. Level of anger was measured by four items that asked subjects to rate responses to anger questions on a nine-point Likert-type scale. For example, participants were asked to rate "How angry with this person are you right now?" and "To what extent to do you feel hostility toward this person?" and "To what extent do you feel friendly toward this person? The anchors were "not at all" to "extremely". A final question asked: "How would you characterize your feelings toward this person now?" The scale was anchored with "extremely mad" to "not mad at all". These four items constituted post-venting anger (α=.87). These items were previously used as the measure of anger in Parlamis et al. (2008) and also showed high reliability (α=.87).

Results

Manipulation Checks

The venting letters were assessed by two raters to determine whether participants recalled an anger-provoking situation that made them angry and continues to bring up anger for them. They also assessed whether subjects vented to the appropriate target (i.e., to a friend, therapist, mediator). Seven participants were removed from analyses. Three participants recalled experiences that were resolved and no longer made them angry. Two participants had incomplete and illegible letters. Another participant addressed the venting letter to the offender instead of the third party to which they were assigned. And a final participant did not appear to understand the directions and did not write a letter. For the no venting conditions, the task was to briefly (in a sentence or two) describe the

jobs of the two people involved in the conflict. Several participants briefly described the facts of the conflict. All participants in the no venting condition were included.

Attributions of Responsibility

All analyses set significance at $p < .05$. Regression analysis using contrast coded predictors did not reveal any significant differences across conditions (all $Fs < 1.3$ ns). Hypothesis 1 predicted that attributions of responsibility would be greater when venting to a friend or therapist than when venting to a mediator. This was not found.

Anger

Regression analysis revealed a significant difference across conditions for anger, $F(3, 79) = 3.66$, $p = .013$. Venting to a third party in general resulted in greater anger than not venting, $t = 2.1$, $p < .04$. Hypothesis 2 which predicted that anger would be greater when venting to a friend or therapist than to a mediator or no venting was only partially borne out by the results. Venting to a friend or therapist did not significantly differ from venting to a mediator however, venting to a mediator or therapist resulted in significantly greater anger than venting to a friend, $t = 2.45$, $p = .017$. Means and standard deviations in Table 1 reveal the pattern of results found for anger. Pairwise analyses reveal that venting to a friend produced significantly less anger than venting to a therapist, $t = 1.64$, $p = .02$, while venting to a therapist resulted in greater anger than not venting, $t = 1.78$, $p = .007$, and venting to a mediator resulted in greater anger than not venting, $t = 1.35$, $p = .04$).

Insert Table 1 about here

Discussion

General

This research replicated results of Parlamis et al., (2008) such that venting to a third party was shown to lead to greater anger than not venting. This is consistent with years of past research indicating that venting does not decrease anger and can increase anger relative to not venting. A new finding of this research concerns the specific third parties that were tested: friend, therapist, and mediator. In particular, this research showed that venting to a mediator or a therapist yielded greater anger than not venting which is further evidence against the Freudian paradigm and conventional wisdom.

Attributions of Responsibility

Attributions of responsibility did not follow the pattern that was expected. It was predicted that attributions would be least when the mediator was the target of venting. Results showed that there were no significant differences in attributions across conditions. While not significant, attributions of responsibility were greatest in the mediator target condition. It was argued that venting to a mediator would focus on rational and logical argumentation; it appears that part of the logic of the argument is a focus on attributions that hold the other party responsible for the conflict. It could be argued that, since a mediator acts as a go-between, individuals would want to influence the mediator's perceptions of the other party's responsibility. Therefore, individuals would use greater attributions of responsibility while communicating the anger-provoking transgression to a mediator not less as originally put forth.

The lack of significant differences in attributions of responsibility across venting target conditions suggests that venting to third parties increases attributions of responsibility in general which is consistent with Parlamis et al. (2008). Additionally, according to attribution appraisal theory if there were differences in anger we should see the differences in attributions. This was not the case. One possibility is that other variables may contribute to post-venting anger in addition to attributions of responsibility. For example, a moderating variable could be time spent venting. It could be that those who spend longer time venting would increase anger. This is akin to ruminating, which has been shown to increase feelings of depression and anger (Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005). A second possibility is that in individuals use different anger regulating techniques during venting and that these can impact anger. For example, emotional regulation strategies such as distraction or seeking understanding (Tice and Baumeister, 1993; Gross, 1998) could impact the anger in conjunction with the attributions. Further research could assess other strategies used during a venting episode that could moderate anger.

Anger

Venting to a friend, therapist, and mediator yielded significantly greater anger than not venting. In particular, venting to a mediator and a therapist showed greater anger than not venting. This is important in that it confirms that venting to a third party does not decrease anger and, in fact, increases anger over not venting. Additionally, this finding has important implications for mediators. A common practice for mediators is to allow each side time to frame the problem or make opening statements (Moore, 2003). This research, in conjunction with the finding that venting to the offender directly does

not increase anger over not venting (Parlamis et al, 2008), may suggest that mediators should ask participants to address their venting to the person to whom they are in conflict. For example mediators who practice a "therapeutic style" of mediation as opposed to a "bargaining style" tend to allow expression about the problem to all parties involved, whereas the latter style is more structured with private caucuses common (Bush & Folger, 1994). This would suggest that private caucuses should be limited.

Limitations

This research focuses on one side of venting; on how attributions and anger are impacted by the act of venting. It does not take into account the fact that venting does not occur in a vacuum. When you vent, there is someone receiving the venting. Whether it is the offender or a third party, they will likely not just stay silent; they will respond. In fact, that could be part of the reason and motivation for why people vent. As argued above, we may vent with a strategic purpose that can only be fully realized if we get a response from the other party. Study 2 will explore responses from offenders and third parties.

Study 2

While venting alone does not decrease anger, it has been proposed that insight or reinterpretation of the anger-provoking event will help bring about a positive transformation of anger (Tavris, 1989; Pennebaker, 1987;1988). Presumably, insight can occur from one's own elucidation and reinterpretation of an event or it can be spurred by another party. In fact, Freud believed that a therapist's suggestion to a patient could change neurotic symptoms and heated emotions (Breuer & Freud, 1957).

It has been suggested (Tavris, 1989; Parlamis et al., 2008) that venting to the offender directly has the potential to reduce anger because the person venting uses less blaming language and the offender can provide new information or correct misperceptions about the anger-provoking incident. On the other hand, venting to a third party (e.g., friend) uses greater blaming language that reinforces anger and, because those unrelated to the conflict have no ability to solve the problem, anger will tend to persist. However, if the third party provides information to clarify or change the understanding of the offense, presumably, anger would tend to diminish. Interestingly, specific responses to venting have not been systematically studied. Study 2 will investigate responses to venting.

Applying an attribution appraisal framework (e.g., Averill, 1982; Roseman, 1984; Weiner, 1985; Smith & Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994), it could be argued that a response that emphasizes internal and controllable attributions for an offender's behavior will not diminish anger, rather this will reinforce the attributions that gave rise to the anger. Without a reinterpretation that changes the attributions, anger will not change. However, if a response to venting emphasizes external and uncontrollable causes for an offender's behavior, anger will tend to diminish.

Hypothesis 1: Responses that reinterpret (contain external and uncontrollable attributions) an offender's behavior will lead to less anger than responses that reinforce (contain internal and controllable attributions) regardless of respondent identity (e.g., offender or third party).

An additional variable we plan on testing is emotional tone. For the purposes of this paper, emotional tone is defined as an overall feeling emerging from an action or

interaction. This is similar to the definition of emotional climate as applied to organizations and defined as "the predominant collective emotions generated through the social interaction of a group's members" (Ruiz, 2007, p.290). While anger is the main emotion that can be effected by venting, it is possible that venting can influence other emotions or a generalized feeling. A specific hypothesis regarding how venting and receiving a response will impact emotional tone is not clear from previous research in emotions or venting. Therefore, an investigation of emotional tone will be exploratory.

Method

Participants. Fifty-two subjects were recruited from several large introductory masters-level classes for participation in the experiment. Ninety-nine percent of subjects answered demographic questions. Of those responding 88 percent of the subjects were female and 12 percent were male. The age of respondent ranged from 17 to over 40 years of age with 70 percent of participants between ages 21 and 30.

Design. This experiment used stimulated recall of a conflict situation to elicit anger. A similar anger-instigation/elicitation method has been shown to reliably produce anger in subjects (Murray and Feshbach, 1978; Allred, Parlamis, & Chiongbian, 1999; Parlamis et al., 2008). The independent variables (Target of venting: offender or third party and Response Type: External or Internal) were manipulated and the dependent variables (anger after venting but before response and anger after response) were measured quantitatively (questionnaire). This was a between-subjects design where subjects were randomly assigned to one of six conditions defined by a 2 (target of venting: offender or third party) x 2 (response type: reinterpret or reinforce).

Participants were assigned to conditions according to a blind procedure in which both the participant and experimenter were not aware of the experimental condition.

Procedure. The data for this study were obtained through a group administration format. Participation was voluntary. The experimenter addressed the group of subjects collectively reading from a prepared script. The research was said to be part of a large study investigating interpersonal encounters and emotions. Subjects were given packets that included an anger recall task, a venting task, a response letter, followed by a questionnaire.

Independent Variable Manipulations

General. Instructions on the front of the questionnaire packets determined the condition. Subjects were asked to recall the most recent time when they were involved in a conflict that made them angry and continues to make them angry now when they think of the incident. They were asked to spend several minutes thinking about the event.

Target. The first independent variable (the target of venting: offender, third party, or no venting) was manipulated in the second paragraph of instructions. After recalling the anger-provoking incident, subjects were asked to write a letter explaining the incident to one of the following: (1) "to that person" (who angered you) or (2) "to a friend" (someone different from the person who made you angry who did not have any direct/personal involvement or knowledge of the incident). Specifically, participants were asked to describe what the offender did to make them angry and how they feel toward the person who angered them. Since this was a between-subjects design, each subject was exposed to one condition only.

Response Type. After participants vented in the form of a letter, they answered a few questions about their anger. Attached to a page in the middle of the questionnaire was an envelope. Participants were instructed to open the envelope and told that inside the envelope they would find a letter from the person to whom they had just wrote a letter, responding to them. They were asked to imagine that the letter truly came from the person to whom they vented. After they read the letter they were instructed to turn the page and continue with the questionnaire. The response letters focused on either external and uncontrollable causes for the offender's behavior or on internal and controllable causes for the offender's behavior. See table 2 for specific response manipulations.

Insert Table 2 about here

Dependent Measures

The questionnaire following the stimulated recall portion of the study as well as the questionnaire following the response letter constituted the two anger measures: one pre-response (after venting) and one post-response. Both the pre and post anger measures comprised items that asked subjects to rate to what extent they felt anger and other general demographic questions. Level of anger was measured by four items that asked subjects to rate responses to anger questions on a nine-point Likert-type scale. Questions were identical to study 1. The four items constituting the pre-response anger measure showed high reliability (α=.92). The four items constituting the post-response anger measure also showed high reliability (α=.91). An additional variable, emotional tone, was measured twice, once after venting (before response) and once after the response was

given. A single item using a nine-point scale measured each variable. For emotional tone after venting (before response) the item read "How do you feel now that you have expressed your anger?" For emotional tone after response the item read "How do you feel now that you have received a response to your letter?" The anchors for both items were "much better" and "much worse".

Results

Manipulation Checks.

The venting letters were assessed by two raters to determine whether subjects vented to the appropriate target (i.e., to a friend or to the offender). Raters examined the letters and assessed the target of venting by determining to whom the letter was written. For example, if the letter was addressed to the offender, indications throughout the letter should be consistent with that condition. If the letter was to a friend two names should be present in the letter: one for the offender and one for the friend to whom the letter was addressed. In all cases letters were consistent with intended manipulations. There was no disagreement between raters. To check the manipulation of response type participants were asked "To what extent did you imagine the letter given back to you was from the person who you wrote to?" Means for all conditions ranged from 5.5 to 6.9, on a nine-point scale, indicating that all participants were engaged with the manipulation. In addition, those who wrote a letter to and received a letter from a third party filled out demographic information about the third party. In all cases they described someone different from the offender.

Target and Response Type

Hypothesis 1 predicted that, across levels of target, participants receiving a reinforcing response (i.e., focus on internal and controllable causes for the offender's behavior) to their venting would lead to greater anger than when participants received a reinterpreting response (i.e., focus on external and uncontrollable causes for the offender's behavior). This hypothesis was tested using a 2 (target: offender or third party) X 2 (response type: reinterpret vs. reinforce) ANCOVA where pre-response anger was used as the covariate. This analysis revealed a significant main effect for response type, $F(1,52) = 6.755$, $p = .012$, indicating that getting a reinforcing response ($M = 4.3$) leads to significantly greater anger than getting a reinterpreting response ($M = 5.6$) controlling for pre-response anger differences. This was consistent with hypothesis 1. Results did not show a significant main effect for target.

However, the main effect for response was qualified by a significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 52) = 6.63$, $p = .01$. As can be seen from figure 1, the influence of the response type has an effect when the offender is responding but not when a third party is responding. In other words, when the offender reinterprets their behavior, anger is much less than when the offender reinforces internal and controllable causes, whereas, a third party (friend) can focus either on reinterpreting or reinforcing attributions without influencing anger of the ventee. A paired samples t-test revealed that although the pattern of means implies that anger decreased after receiving a reinterpreting response from an offender ($M = 3.83$) when compared to before response anger ($M = 4.18$) it did not reach significance. However, paired samples t-test did show that a reinforcing response from an offender did significantly increase anger over pre-anger levels, $t = 2.93$, $p < .01$ (for means and standard deviations see Table 3).

A 2 (target: offender or third party) X 2 (response type: reinterpret vs. reinforce) mixed model ANOVA with target and response type as between subject variables and emotional tone as a repeated-measures variable. Analysis revealed no significant main effects. A significant three-way interaction was obtained for response type, target, and tone, $F(1,48) = 13.33$, $p = .001$, indicating that the interaction of response type and target on emotional tone differed significantly from the pre-response tone measure to the post-response tone measure. Further two-way ANOVAs indicated no significant differences across conditions for pre-response emotional tone whereas post-response emotional tone revealed highly significant interaction between target and response type for post-response emotional tone, $F(1,48) = 22.51$, $p < .000$. To further clarify the findings paired t-tests were preformed indicating significant pairwise differences (see table 4).

Discussion

Results of study 2 show that response type (reinforcing or reinterpreting) does make a significant impact on anger such that reinforcing responses (emphasizing internal and controllable cause for an offender's behavior) increase anger over reinterpreting responses (emphasizing external and uncontrollable causes for an offender's behavior). This suggests that attribution appraisal theory, which would predict that reinforcing attributions of responsibility that gave rise to the initial anger will lead to greater anger over reinterpreting the anger-provoking event by focusing on external or extenuating circumstances, is correct. However, results indicate that this effect is moderated by identity of respondent (target). Specifically, it was found that receiving a response from a third party that either reinterprets or reinforces causes for anger-provoking behavior does

not influence the ventee's anger. It appears that it is only when the offender responds with a reinforcing response that anger increases

These results also highlight the idea that venting is used as a way of regulating emotions for specific goals or purposes. If venting is seen as a way of regulating emotions (i.e., staying angry so one can muster courage to deal with an issue or decreasing anger to garner an apology) than finding less anger when an offender focuses on reinterpreting and clarifying misunderstandings would comport with the proposition that individuals vent to offenders to resolve disputes or to open communication. When individuals receive a response that reinforces the causal attributions that engender the anger, more anger results in part due to reinforcing attributions of responsibility but also in part due to a mis-match in expectations. Interestingly, venting to a friend (third party) we may want to stay angry or to muster support for our side in a dispute. Regardless of what the friend says our anger remains. Further research should investigate venting as a emotion regulation strategy and assess the goals and expectations that individuals have when venting.

Emotional Tone

The results show a significant interaction between response type and target for emotional tone such that getting a reinforcing response from an offender makes participants feel worse but when a third party makes a reinforcing response participants feel better. Additionally, when a third party makes a reinterpreting response participants rate their emotional tone as worse than when third parties reinforce. This suggests two important implications. First, venting may influence other emotions or general feelings outside of anger. While it is not new that venting can and does influence other variables,

for example, previous research has explored other dependent measures such as heart rate, doctor visits, and depressed mood (see Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001), the idea that individuals may feel a type of satisfaction or overall better feeling is new. Second, this could give some insight into why conventional wisdom on the topic is so hard to change. It could be that anger does not decrease from venting and, in fact, it tends to increase, however, if individuals get some other ancillary benefit from venting it could be intuitively felt and just heretofore untested.

It is important to note that emotional tone was measured by one question. It was not measured by a generally accepted scale and we did not have multiple items measuring the construct. This is a limitation of this research. Future studies should develop a scale measure of emotional tone for greater construct validity and reliability.

General Discussion

The preliminary results of experiment 1 and 2 provide important supplements to the venting and emotional expression literature. The findings of experiment 1 argue that venting may not be appropriate for those who wish to reduce their anger, because venting to third parties can increase anger as compared to not venting. The findings of experiment 2 show the importance of the response someone gives to the ventee. While attribution appriasal theory would suggest a response that reinforces the external and uncontrollable causes as a means to anger reduction, the findings here indicate that something a bit more complex is occurring. Goals, strategies, and expectations may play a role in the reduction of the ventee's anger. In other words, the ventee may expect a particular reaction from the target (offender or third party) and if the response is different from what is expected, anger may intensify. These studies illuminate new prescriptions

for venting anger in conflict and offer preliminary insight into appropriate responses to venting.

Limitations and future research

Two major limitations of this research should be mentioned. First, both studies used a stimulated recall of an anger-provoking event. This is different from "real" anger or anger that is happening in action. Designing a study where participants feel real anger would give greater control over the intensity and type of anger experience. Second, and somewhat related issue is investigating venting and responses in real-world negotiation or conflict contexts. Future research could examine mediations having participants vent to either the mediator or to the offender directly and then assess anger as well as outcomes such as settlement success or satisfaction with the mediation process.

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Table 1

Means and standard deviations for anger and attributions of responsibility as function of target of venting

Dependent measure	Experimental Condition			
	Friend	Therapist	Mediator	No Venting
Attributions	6.89_{a} (1.21)	7.03_{a} (1.32)	7.38_{a} (.82)	
Anger	4.71_{ac} (1.86)	6.35_{b} (2.13)	5.92_{ab} (2.15)	4.57_{c} (2.15)

Note. Means not sharing the same subscript differ at $p < .05$. Rating for attributions of responsibility and anger were on a 9-point scale. A higher number indicates greater attributions and anger.

Table 2

Study 2 Response letters

	Response Type	
Target	Reinterpret	Reinforce
Third Party	I just got your letter about how you're angry and I wanted to make sure that you've considered all sides of the story. Perhaps it is out of character for them to act this way. Do you think it's possible that there were extenuating circumstances which may have led to their actions? While I understand that you are upset, it's important that you are sure that the person you are mad at is really to blame for what happened.	I just got your letter about how you're angry and I wanted to tell you that I agree with you. What they did was wrong and you have every right to be upset; it's not fair for you to be treated this way. It sounds like, from what you said, that this person is in the wrong and responsible for making you mad. I understand why you are so angry, and if I were in your shoes I would feel the same way.
Offender	I just got your letter about how you're angry with me for what I did and I wanted to make sure that you've considered my side of the story. It was out of character for me to act this way, and there were extenuating circumstances that led to my actions. While I understand that you are upset, it's important that you are aware of the circumstances that led to my behavior, which I would like to explain to you when we have the chance to talk in person.	I just got your letter about how you're angry with me for what I did and I wanted to tell you that others have responded to my behavior in a similar way in situations in the past. While I understand why you are upset with me, you should know that this is generally how I handle situations and it is not likely that I am going to change. This is just the way I am.

Figure 1

Mean anger as a function of venting target and response type in study 2.

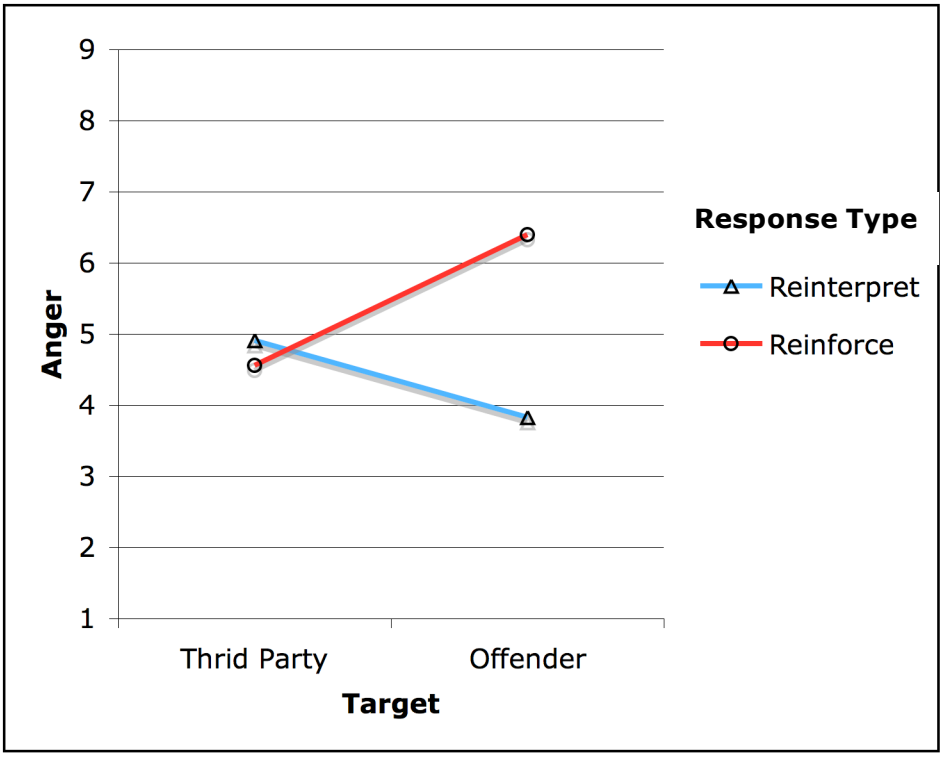


Table 3

Means and standard deviations for anger before and after venting responses as a function of response type and target.

	Response Type			
	Reinterpret		Reinforce	
Target	Third Party	Offender	Third Party	Offender
Anger Before	4.95 (2.30)	4.18 (2.22)	4.41 (1.95)	5.12 (1.93)
Anger After	4.91 (1.80)	3.83 (1.75)	4.57 (1.62)	6.40 (1.68)

Table 4

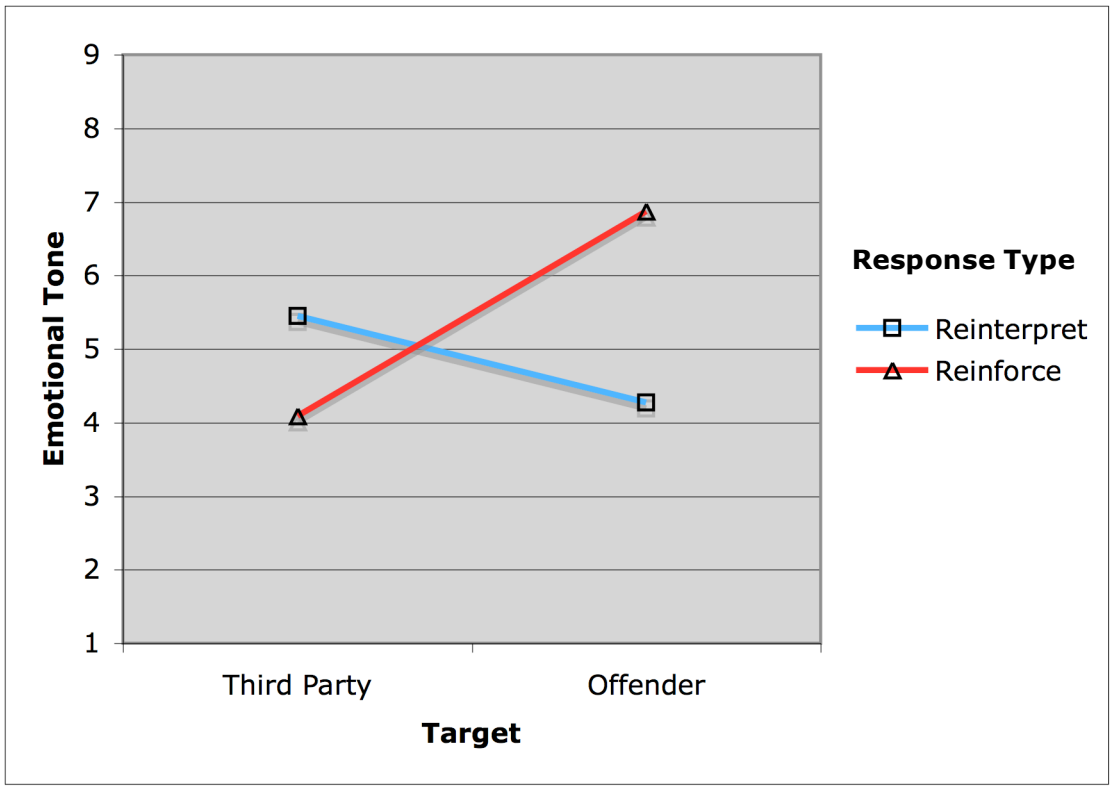
Means and standard deviations for emotional tone before and after venting responses as a function of response type and target.

	Response Type			
	Reinterpret		Reinforce	
Target	Third Party	Offender	Third Party	Offender
Emotional Tone Before	5.36 (1.03)	6.00 (1.73)	5.55 (1.44)	5.47 (2.03)
Emotional Tone After	5.45 $(1.7)_a$	4.27 $(1.62)_b$	4.09 $(1.38)_{bc}$	6.87 $(1.25)_d$

Note. Emotional tone was rated on a nine-point scale with 9 indicating feeling "much worse" and 1 indicating feeling "much better". Subscripts matching do not differ at $p < .05$.

Figure 2

Emotional tone as a function of target and response type.



Footnotes

[1] Breuer and Freud's belief that venting can have beneficial consequences, such as decreasing anger, had its genesis in the classic case of Breuer's hysterical patient Anna O. Anna O, after being hypnotized, uncovered her past negative experiences and then verbally expressed her emotions, curing her of hysteria (Breuer & Freud, 1957). The Anna O case and its "talking cure" provided the first anecdotal evidence for what has been called the catharsis hypothesis, *i.e.*, that venting or the verbal expression of anger leads to a beneficial release of the anger: a catharsis.

[2] Practical advice suggests other routes to anger reduction such as focusing on underlying interests, concerns, and wants not positions, taking a break from negotiations, active listening and engaging in perspective taking (Tavris, 1984; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991; Ury, 1993; Hackley, 2004; Fisher & Shapiro, 2005). This paper is solely concerned with advice pertaining to venting.

[3] It is important to note that anger expression in negotiation contexts have shown mixed results (see Steinel, Van kleef, & Harinck, 2008).

[4] Cognitive appraisal theory differs from other theories of emotion in that it asserts a cognition-affect-behavior causal sequence. For a review of other theories of emotion see Schacter & Singer (1962) and Leventhal (1980).