Why Anger Exists: An Evolutionary Alarm in the Age of Digital Amplification

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Abstract

This article develops the concept of 'manufacture of dissent[1]' and ‘moral outrage networks[2]’ to examine why anger exists by combining evolutionary psychology with a sociology of digital communication. Drawing on the recalibrational theory of anger developed by Aaron Sell, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, it argues that anger evolved as a strategic social emotion designed to renegotiate unfair welfare tradeoffs, enforce boundaries and deter exploitation. Far from being a loss of control, anger functioned as an internal alarm system that mobilised energy, signalled resolve and restored balance within small-scale social environments. The article then shows how this adaptive mechanism becomes systematically distorted in digital societies. Networked communication systems continuously activate anger through symbolic cues, algorithmic amplification and attention-based incentives while removing the conditions necessary for resolution, negotiation and recalibration. As a result, anger shifts from an episodic corrective response to a chronic background state. What once stabilised cooperation now accumulates into permanent grievance, narrowed judgement and identity-based hostility. The article argues that digital platforms do not merely host anger but exploit its evolved alarm properties, transforming a survival mechanism into an infrastructure of engagement, visibility and power. Understanding why anger exists is therefore essential for explaining both its historical value and its contemporary dysfunction in networked public life.

Key words

anger; evolutionary psychology; recalibrational theory; welfare tradeoff ratios; digital anger; attention economy; social signalling; emotion and power; moral psychology; platform society

Why Anger exists?

This section draws on the evolutionary work[3] of Aaron Sell, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, who reconceptualise anger not as a loss of control but as a strategic social emotion shaped by natural selection. In their 2009 article, they argue that anger functions as a bargaining mechanism that evolved to recalibrate how much others value one’s welfare in situations of conflict or exploitation. Sell’s subsequent 2011 paper[4] formalises this insight into a

[1] Ayolov, P. (2023). The Economic Policy of Online Media. Taylor & Francis.
[2] Ayolov, P. (2026). Moral Outrage Networks: The Sociology of Digital Anger
[3] Sell, A., Tooby, J. and Cosmides, L. (2009) ‘Formidability and the logic of human anger’, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106(35), pp. 15073–15078.
[4] Sell, A. (2011) ‘The recalibrational theory and violent anger’, Aggression and Violent Behavior, 16(5), pp. 381–389.

recalibrational theory of anger, showing how anger is triggered when perceived welfare tradeoff ratios fall below an acceptable threshold, motivating confrontational or coercive responses to restore balance. Anger exists because it has long functioned as a reliable internal alarm system[5], alerting humans to threat, violation and imbalance. Far from being a defect, anger is one of the oldest affective mechanisms in human evolution, shaped to protect bodies, relationships and social position. In the context of this article, anger is approached not as a moral failure or psychological glitch, but as a functional response whose original purpose has been radically transformed by digital communication systems. At its biological core, anger is part of the fight response. When a threat is perceived, the brain initiates a rapid cascade of physiological changes: adrenaline surges, heart rate accelerates, blood is redirected toward large muscles and sensitivity to pain diminishes. The body is prepared for confrontation rather than retreat. Anger suppresses hesitation and fear, allowing decisive action in situations where withdrawal would mean loss, injury or death. This mechanism evolved in environments where danger was immediate, physical and short-lived. The alarm sounded, action followed, and resolution arrived quickly. As human societies became more complex, anger adapted to social rather than purely physical threats. Evolutionary perspectives describe anger as a bargaining mechanism that regulates cooperation. Anger is triggered when an individual perceives that another person is undervaluing their wellbeing or violating an implicit social contract. In this sense, anger functions as a signal demanding recalibration. It communicates that the current balance of costs and benefits is unacceptable and that change is required. Anger therefore plays a role in maintaining fairness, reciprocity and mutual recognition within groups. This social function explains anger's close relationship to boundaries. Anger marks the moment when a line has been crossed, when a norm has been breached or when dignity is threatened. It tells others that certain behaviours carry consequences. In small-scale communities, this signalling helped stabilise cooperation and deter exploitation. Importantly, anger's effectiveness depended on its episodic nature. It was not meant to be constant. An alarm that never stops loses its meaning and its authority. Anger also contributes to motivation and goal pursuit. It is an approach-oriented emotion, directing energy toward obstacles rather than away from them. When goals are blocked, anger provides focus, persistence and intensity. Frustration is converted into force. At the collective level, this dynamic becomes moral anger. Shared indignation over injustice has historically driven resistance, reform and social transformation. Anger has therefore played a role in challenging domination and correcting structural wrongs, particularly when other channels of influence were closed. Another key function of anger lies in communication and status. Displays of anger evolved as signals of strength, resolve and readiness to escalate. Facial expressions, posture and tone of voice communicate that an individual is not passive or easily dominated. In many social contexts, controlled expressions of anger have been associated with authority and competence. Anger signals that one expects to be taken seriously. This signalling function remains powerful even when detached from physical confrontation. The problem emerges when an alarm system designed for rare, high-stakes situations becomes chronically activated. Modern digital environments continuously stimulate anger while removing its natural resolution mechanisms. Threats are no longer immediate or solvable. They are symbolic, abstract and endlessly reproduced. Headlines, notifications and algorithmic amplification keep the anger response activated without allowing closure. The reflective capacities of the mind are repeatedly bypassed in favour of rapid emotional reaction. Under these conditions, anger shifts from an adaptive signal to a background state. What once recalibrated social relations now

[5] Cannon, W.B. (1932) The Wisdom of the Body. New York: W. W. Norton.

distorts them. Anger ceases to negotiate and begins to accumulate. Judgement narrows, empathy declines and identity becomes organised around permanent grievance. The alarm no longer points to a specific danger; it defines the world itself as hostile. This transformation lies at the centre of the sociology of digital anger. Platforms do not merely host anger; they are structurally aligned with its alarm properties. Anger captures attention, sustains engagement and produces predictable behavioural patterns. What evolved to protect humans is repurposed into an infrastructure of visibility, identity and power. Anger exists because it once kept humans alive and socially integrated. It persists today because digital systems have learned to keep the alarm permanently switched on.

Did Anger Make Us Happy?

This section draws primarily on Kevin Bennett's article[6] 'Did Anger Evolve to Make Us Happy?' (2024) and the recalibration theory of anger developed by Aaron Sell and colleagues, which reframes anger as an evolved social adaptation rather than a purely destructive impulse. Anger is commonly treated as a problem to be managed or suppressed, especially in modern societies where it is associated with aggression, conflict and social breakdown. Yet evolutionary psychology proposes a different starting point. Anger did not emerge by accident, nor did it survive millions of years of human evolution because it made people miserable. It persisted because it performed a function. The recalibration theory of anger argues that anger evolved as a social mechanism designed to promote fairness, discourage exploitation and renegotiate one's position within social hierarchies. In this model, anger functions as an internal signal that something has gone wrong in the balance between individuals. It is triggered when a person perceives that others are undervaluing their interests, ignoring their boundaries or violating shared norms. Rather than being random or irrational, anger communicates a demand for recalibration. It announces that the current arrangement is unacceptable and that corrective action is required. The threat implicit in anger is not necessarily violence, but the withdrawal of cooperation, reputational damage or escalation of conflict if conditions do not change. This perspective reframes anger as a strategic emotion. It mobilises physiological energy, sharpens attention and focuses motivation on confronting the source of perceived injustice. Anger is therefore an approach-oriented emotion, pushing individuals toward action rather than retreat. From an evolutionary standpoint, this made sense in small-scale societies where cooperation was essential but always vulnerable to free-riding and domination. Anger helped regulate these social exchanges by imposing costs on those who violated expectations of fairness. The recalibration theory also highlights individual variation. People differ in what researchers call recalibration sensitivity, meaning the threshold at which anger is triggered. Some individuals react strongly to minor slights, while others tolerate significant violations before becoming angry. These differences are shaped by genetic predispositions, personal history and cultural norms. What counts as an insult, an injustice or an unacceptable imbalance is never purely biological. It is interpreted through social meaning. This emphasis on social context is crucial for understanding anger in contemporary digital societies. Online environments dramatically amplify the recalibration function of anger while stripping it of its natural constraints. In face-to-face settings, anger unfolds within relationships that involve long-term consequences, mutual recognition and the possibility of repair. Digital platforms remove these conditions.

[6] Bennett, K. (2024) 'Did Anger Evolve to Make Us Happy?', Psychology Today, 20 March; Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/modern-minds/202403/did-anger-evolve-to-make-us-happy.

Anger becomes detached from direct negotiation and transformed into a broadcast signal aimed at audiences rather than interlocutors. Recent research has extended recalibration theory beyond interpersonal interaction to social institutions. Studies of Western criminal justice systems suggest that institutional practices often mirror evolved anger mechanisms, particularly the human tendency toward punitive responses driven by moral outrage. These systems may fail when they escalate anger rather than resolve it, revealing a deeper mismatch between human emotional architecture and bureaucratic procedures. The broader implication is that institutions succeed or fail depending on how well they align with human emotional design. Within networked communication systems, anger becomes especially powerful because it is legible, contagious and profitable. Expressions of anger signal moral seriousness, boundary enforcement and group loyalty. They are rewarded with visibility, engagement and social reinforcement. In this environment, anger no longer merely recalibrates relationships. It becomes an identity marker and a form of symbolic capital. The question shifts from whether anger promotes fairness to whether it is being continuously exploited as an attention mechanism. This does not mean anger is inherently harmful. The recalibration theory insists that anger can support cooperation by discouraging exploitation. The danger arises when anger is constantly activated without resolution. Chronic anger loses its corrective function and becomes corrosive. Digital infrastructures specialise in sustaining this condition by presenting endless provocations without pathways for repair or renegotiation. The alarm sounds repeatedly, but nothing is recalibrated. Traditional approaches to anger management focus on individual regulation through cognitive reappraisal, communication skills or mindfulness. While valuable, these strategies address symptoms rather than structure. The sociology of digital anger asks a different question. What happens when an evolved emotional mechanism designed for negotiation and fairness is embedded in systems that reward escalation, permanence and spectacle? From this perspective, anger did not evolve to make humans happy. It evolved to make social life workable under conditions of vulnerability and interdependence. Happiness was never the goal. Stability, fairness and survival were. In digital societies, anger persists not because it still fulfils this role, but because it has been repurposed into an infrastructure of visibility, identity and power. Understanding anger as an alarm system helps explain both its original value and its contemporary dysfunction.

The logic of human anger

Anger is not a psychological malfunction or a cultural accident. In evolutionary terms, it is a specialised regulatory system shaped to manage conflicts of interest in social life. Sell, Tooby and Cosmides propose[7] that anger evolved as a bargaining mechanism, designed to recalibrate how much weight others place on one's welfare. Rather than merely reacting to harm, anger functions as a strategic signal: it activates when a person detects that another individual is undervaluing their interests and seeks to correct this imbalance. At the core of this model lies the concept of welfare tradeoff ratios. In any social interaction, individuals implicitly balance their own welfare against that of others. These tradeoffs are not abstract moral principles but internal regulatory variables that guide behaviour. When another person acts in a way that places too little weight on one's welfare, anger is triggered. The emotion then organises behaviour aimed at forcing a recalibration of that ratio in the angry individual's favour. Anger,

[7] Sell, A., Tooby, J. and Cosmides, L. (2009) 'Formidability and the logic of human anger', Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106(35), pp. 15073–15078.

in this sense, is not about venting emotion but about renegotiating social terms. The recalibrational logic of anger relies on two fundamental bargaining tools available to social organisms. The first is the ability to inflict costs, such as through physical aggression, intimidation or punishment. The second is the ability to confer or withhold benefits, such as cooperation, alliance, affection or access to valued resources. Anger prepares the individual to signal that one or both of these tools will be deployed if the imbalance continues. Importantly, anger is often expressed before actual costs are imposed, allowing the target to adjust behaviour without escalation. This bargaining system depends on accurate internal assessments of leverage. Sell and colleagues argue that the anger system tracks two key dimensions: formidability, or the ability to impose costs, and benefit conferral, or the ability to provide valued advantages. Individuals who are more formidable or more valuable to others should expect better treatment and are therefore more likely to become angry when they are disrespected. Anger is thus calibrated to social position rather than evenly distributed across individuals. Empirical evidence supports this claim. Physical strength, particularly upper-body strength in men, predicts anger proneness, perceived entitlement and success in conflicts of interest. Stronger men report more frequent anger, a greater belief in the effectiveness of force, and a greater history of physical confrontation. These patterns are not random expressions of temperament but follow a functional logic: when anger is more likely to succeed, it is more likely to be activated. Attractiveness plays a parallel role, especially for women. Because attractiveness is associated with health, fertility and social value, more attractive individuals possess greater leverage in social exchanges. They receive preferential treatment across many domains, from employment to legal judgement, and implicitly expect higher welfare tradeoffs from others. When these expectations are violated, anger is more likely to arise. This explains why entitlement and anger are not moral flaws but outputs of an evolved calibration system. Sex differences emerge naturally from this framework. Ancestrally, physical aggression was a more effective bargaining tool for men than for women, while benefit conferral through mate choice carried greater leverage for women. Accordingly, strength has a stronger effect on anger in men, while attractiveness has a stronger effect in women. These differences are not cultural stereotypes but statistical consequences of evolved bargaining asymmetries. Crucially, the internal logic of anger reflects ancestral social environments rather than modern institutional realities. One striking finding is that stronger men are more likely to endorse the use of military force in international conflicts, even though individual strength has no rational relevance to modern state warfare. This suggests that anger-related decision systems evolved in small-scale societies where personal formidability mattered directly and continue to influence judgement in large-scale, abstract political contexts. For a sociology of anger, this insight is decisive. Anger is not simply an internal feeling, but a social technology shaped by evolutionary pressures and redeployed in modern institutions. In digital environments, where signals of outrage, threat and punishment circulate without physical constraint, the same recalibrational logic operates at scale. Online anger seeks to impose costs through shaming and exclusion, or to withdraw benefits through boycotts and deplatforming. What once regulated face-to-face bargaining now animates networked moral conflict. Anger, then, is best understood not as irrationality but as a functional program whose outputs can become dangerously misaligned with contemporary social systems. Its logic remains powerful precisely because it is ancient, automatic and deeply social.

Anger for change

Anger has long been treated as a disruptive force in public life, yet modern research increasingly recognises it as one of the most powerful engines of political mobilisation. Kat Williams and Scott R. Stroud's article[8] 'Angry for Change' (2020) examines how anger operates as a powerful but ethically ambivalent force in democratic life, capable of mobilising political participation while simultaneously posing risks to deliberation, justice and social cohesion. Anger matters not because it is virtuous in itself, but because it operates as a social energy capable of reorganising attention, commitment and collective action. In democratic societies, anger has repeatedly functioned as a catalyst for participation, especially among those who feel excluded, ignored or structurally disadvantaged. Empirical political research in the United States demonstrates that anger is a particularly effective motivator of civic engagement. Studies led by Nicholas Valentino show that angry citizens are more likely than those driven by enthusiasm or anxiety to engage in visible political behaviour such as attending rallies, volunteering, displaying campaign symbols or turning out to vote. Anger, in this sense, does not paralyse; it activates. It directs people outward, toward confrontation with institutions and elites, rather than inward toward resignation. From a sociological perspective, this helps explain why anger has become a preferred emotional register in mass politics, especially under conditions of perceived injustice or democratic stagnation. The moral defence of anger has been developed most clearly in feminist philosophy. Myisha Cherry and Macalester Bell argue that anger can perform several ethically valuable functions: it names wrongdoing, assigns moral significance to harm, motivates resistance, and generates knowledge. Anger, on this account, is epistemic. It reveals social realities that are otherwise normalised or obscured. Groups subjected to systemic injustice often come to understand their position precisely through the hostile reactions provoked by their anger. When peaceful protest is met with repression, the anger that follows does not merely express pain; it confirms the structure of domination. Audre Lorde's essay 'The Uses of Anger' provides a powerful illustration of this logic. For Lorde, anger was not a loss of control but a resource that transformed private suffering into collective articulation. Anger forced attention, demanded response, and converted marginalised experience into political speech. Within this framework, anger functions as a technology of audibility: it makes claims that cannot be politely ignored. In networked publics, this function is intensified, as anger travels faster, reaches wider audiences, and confers visibility on issues otherwise excluded from mainstream discourse. Political theorists such as Amia Srinivasan extend this argument by suggesting that public anger can reshape moral understanding itself. Anger does not merely demand redress; it educates. By insisting that certain harms matter, it presses societies to revise their moral boundaries. Historical movements for civil rights and labour protection relied on what might be called righteous anger: a collective emotion that transformed fear into resolve and isolation into solidarity. Anger, in these cases, did not fragment the public sphere but reorganised it around new standards of justice. Yet the same features that make anger politically potent also make it dangerous. Philosophers often labelled as anger-pessimists, from Seneca to Martha Nussbaum, warn that anger easily slides from protest into retribution. Once anger seeks punishment rather than change, it risks undermining justice itself. Nussbaum argues that while anger can draw attention to injustice, its fixation on payback often blocks reconciliation and durable reform. From this perspective, anger must be tightly constrained if it is not to corrode democratic norms. These concerns acquire new urgency in contemporary

[8] Williams, K. and Stroud, S.R. (2020) 'Angry for change', Center for Media Engagement, University of Texas at Austin. Available at: https://mediaengagement.org/research/angry-for-change/ (Accessed: 16 January 2026).

media environments. Research by Berry and Sobieraj documents the rise of an outrage-based media economy in which emotional provocation becomes a business model. Cable news and digital platforms increasingly rely on sensationalism, moral polarisation and personalised blame to sustain attention. In this environment, anger is no longer episodic or situational; it becomes ambient. Outrage is constantly renewed, rarely resolved, and systematically rewarded. The result is a public sphere dominated by escalation rather than deliberation. From the perspective of this text, the ethical question is not whether anger should exist in politics, but how it is structured, channelled and governed. Anger can illuminate injustice and mobilise reform, but it can also be weaponised, commodified and turned into an infrastructure of permanent conflict. When institutions respond primarily to the loudest and most outraged voices, moderation is marginalised and compromise becomes politically toxic. Classical philosophy already anticipated this tension. Aristotle argued that anger is justified only when directed at the right object, in the right way, at the right time. This demanding criterion highlights the difficulty of ethical anger in mass societies, and even more so in digital networks where scale, speed and anonymity disrupt proportionality. Anger for change remains indispensable, but without limits it risks becoming anger as spectacle, identity and habit. In contemporary democracies, anger is neither a moral cure nor a moral disease. It is a force. Whether it produces justice or destruction depends on the social systems that amplify it, the narratives that legitimise it, and the institutions that absorb or exploit it.

The benefits of anger

Anger is often described as a disruptive or dangerous emotion, yet a closer examination reveals that it plays a vital role in human survival, motivation and social coordination[9]. Rather than being inherently destructive, anger contains a form of energy[10] that can be directed toward protection, correction and change. Anger is best understood not as a personal failure of self-control but as a social signal that activates when individuals or groups perceive obstruction, injustice or threat. At its most basic level, anger functions as an alarm system. It is closely connected to the body's fight response, mobilising physiological resources when something important is at stake. Increased heart rate, muscle tension and sharpened attention prepare the individual to confront danger rather than withdraw from it. In ancestral environments, this mechanism supported physical survival. In contemporary societies, the same system is activated by symbolic threats such as humiliation, exclusion, unfair treatment or loss of status. Anger signals that boundaries have been crossed and that passivity would be costly. One of anger's defining features is that it is an approach-oriented emotion. Unlike fear or sadness, which tend to produce avoidance, anger pushes individuals toward action. It narrows focus, increases persistence and reduces hesitation. This is why anger is so effective at overcoming inertia. When goals are blocked or values violated, anger supplies the momentum required to confront obstacles and demand change. In social and political life, this makes anger a powerful driver of participation, protest and resistance. Anger also produces a subjective sense of control and optimism. When people are angry, they are more likely to believe that outcomes can be influenced and that risks are manageable. This psychological shift matters because collective action depends on confidence as much as grievance. Groups that feel only fear or despair are unlikely to mobilise. Groups that feel anger, by contrast, often develop a shared belief that

[9] Barbalet, J.M. (2001) Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[10] Averill, J.R. (1982) Anger and Aggression: An Essay on Emotion. New York: Springer.

action is both necessary and possible. In moments of crisis, anger can therefore reduce paralysis and facilitate coordination. Beyond motivation, anger plays an important communicative role. Constructively expressed anger clarifies expectations and enforces boundaries. In interpersonal relationships, unspoken resentment tends to erode trust, while appropriately articulated anger can restore balance by signalling what is unacceptable. The same logic operates at the societal level. Anger communicates that certain behaviours or arrangements violate shared norms. In this way, anger contributes to social regulation rather than undermining it. Anger can also be a source of learning. Episodes of anger often reveal misalignments between lived experience and moral expectation. When individuals reflect on their anger, they gain insight into what they value and where they feel vulnerable. At the collective level, anger exposes injustices that have been normalised or ignored. Many social reforms begin not with calm deliberation but with sustained moral anger that forces issues into public visibility. Anger, in this sense, has epistemic value: it brings hidden conflicts to light. Embracing anger rather than repressing it can contribute to emotional intelligence. Emotional maturity does not require the absence of anger but the capacity to recognise, regulate and channel it. People who acknowledge difficult emotions are often more resilient than those who seek emotional comfort alone. Anger, handled with care, becomes a resource for self-knowledge and growth rather than a threat to well-being. However, the benefits of anger are conditional. Anger becomes harmful when it is chronic, misdirected or detached from resolution. Repressed anger can manifest as depression, anxiety or physical illness, while unchecked anger can escalate into aggression and violence. In modern media environments, anger is increasingly prolonged and amplified. Digital systems reward outrage without closure, transforming anger from a situational response into a permanent state. When anger no longer leads to correction or change, it loses its adaptive function and becomes socially corrosive. For the purposes of this article, the central point is not to celebrate anger uncritically, nor to condemn it outright. Anger is a form of energy that can illuminate injustice, motivate action and restore balance, but it can also be exploited, monetised and weaponised. Whether anger produces cooperation or conflict depends on how it is structured, expressed and governed within social systems. Understanding its benefits is therefore essential, not to justify perpetual outrage, but to distinguish between anger that leads to change and anger that merely sustains division.

Anger as a plus

In her 2003 article[11] ‘Anger as a Plus’, written for the American Psychological Association, Tori DeAngelis synthesises psychological research showing that anger, far from being merely destructive, can function as a socially productive emotion in relationships, workplaces and political life. For a sociology of anger, this argument is crucial because it reframes anger not as a failure of rationality but as a structured response that can clarify conflicts, redistribute power and mobilise collective action. Anger has long been treated with suspicion in moral, religious and philosophical traditions, often associated with loss of control or violence. Yet empirical research challenges the assumption that anger is inherently harmful. Psychologists increasingly distinguish anger from aggression, noting that the two coincide far less often than popular belief suggests. Most episodes of anger do not result in violence, and much violence occurs without anger at all. This distinction allows anger to be analysed as a communicative and motivational

[11] DeAngelis, T. (2003) ‘Anger as a plus’, Monitor on Psychology, 34(3), p. 44. American Psychological Association.

force rather than a pathological impulse. In everyday social life, anger often plays a corrective role. Studies of ordinary anger episodes show that, in many cases, anger leads to positive or neutral long-term outcomes rather than damage. When expressed in a context where it is heard and responded to, anger can bring underlying problems to the surface, forcing issues that were previously ignored or minimised into explicit discussion. In intimate relationships, anger can function as an alert system, signalling that one party feels unheard, disrespected or disadvantaged. When the response is appropriate, misunderstandings are corrected and relationships strengthened rather than weakened. From this perspective, constructive anger is less about emotional release than about problem-solving. Psychologists emphasise that anger becomes productive when it is framed around resolving a shared issue rather than asserting dominance or seeking revenge. Anger that is embedded in dialogue and oriented toward solutions can recalibrate expectations and restore balance. By contrast, anger that is either suppressed or explosively discharged tends to produce negative outcomes. Suppressed anger is associated with depression, stress and physical illness, while unchecked anger can escalate into aggression and coercion. Anger also plays a significant role in hierarchies of power and status. In organisational and political contexts, anger is often interpreted not as weakness but as strength. Research shows that individuals who express anger in professional or political settings are frequently perceived as more competent, confident and authoritative than those who express sadness or guilt. Anger, in these arenas, operates as a strategic signal rather than an emotional confession. It communicates resolve, certainty and a willingness to confront opposition, all of which can enhance perceived leadership. This status effect helps explain why anger has been repeatedly mobilised in political movements. Historically, large-scale social change has rarely occurred through polite appeals alone. Movements such as women's suffrage and civil rights relied on sustained collective anger to disrupt complacency and force recognition of injustice. Anger transformed moral claims into political pressure. Without it, grievances remained invisible or easily dismissed. Anger, in this sense, functions as a mechanism that converts moral discontent into public force. The empowering effects of anger become especially visible during periods of crisis and uncertainty. Research conducted after major traumatic events shows that anger can reduce fear and increase a sense of control. Compared to fear, which amplifies uncertainty and risk aversion, anger simplifies the emotional landscape, producing confidence and readiness for action. This can have adaptive consequences at the collective level, enabling coordination and resilience in the face of threat. However, this same simplification can also narrow judgment, making individuals more prone to bias and overconfidence. For a sociology of digital anger, these findings acquire new significance. The same properties that make anger effective in face-to-face contexts—its clarity, confidence and mobilising force—are amplified in media systems that reward emotional intensity. Anger travels well across networks, attracts attention and sustains engagement. Yet when anger is detached from resolution and continuously reactivated, its constructive potential erodes. What begins as an alert can become a permanent condition, reinforcing polarisation rather than correcting injustice. Anger, then, is neither a moral virtue nor a social toxin by default. It is a tool. Its effects depend on context, expression and institutional mediation. Anger can clarify problems, empower the marginalised and motivate change, but it can also distort judgment and entrench conflict when exploited or prolonged. Recognising anger as a plus does not mean celebrating outrage uncritically. It means understanding anger's social logic, its benefits and its limits, especially in environments where it has become a dominant currency of public life.

The moral justification of anger

Jinjin Zhang, Zhiheng Xiong, Hao Zheng and Xiangzhen Ma's article[12] 'The Moral Psychological Justification of Anger: An Exploration of Self-Respect and Recognition' reframes anger not as a problem to be judged by its outcomes, but as a moral signal whose meaning depends on what, exactly, is being demanded when someone gets angry. In moral psychology and in everyday talk, anger is often treated in a simple consequentialist way: if it produces harm, it is condemned; if it produces reform, it is praised. That framing fits public debate, but it does not explain why anger feels compelling even when it is counterproductive, or why people remain angry when 'payback' is clearly unavailable. This paper proposes a shift from consequences to foundations: anger is best understood as bound to recognition, to the need to be acknowledged as a person whose dignity counts. This move matters directly for a sociology of anger in networked public life. Online, anger rarely arrives as a private feeling seeking quiet resolution. It circulates as a claim, a badge, and a demand, often addressed to an audience as much as to an offender. Anger becomes communicative infrastructure: it marks boundaries, declares injuries, and recruits allies. The paper's central distinction therefore becomes useful: anger can be justified when it responds to a failure of equal recognition, and unjustified when it expresses a craving for superiority, status, or dominance. In other words, not all anger is the same kind of moral speech. Some anger asks to be treated as an equal; some anger asks to be treated as above others. The paper also challenges the common philosophical picture that anger is essentially retaliatory. A great deal of anti-anger argumentation, from classical scepticism to modern liberal moral theory, treats anger as a wish for revenge that cannot truly repair what has been lost, cannot restore dignity, and therefore distracts from justice. Against this, the authors argue that anger's deeper aim is often neither cruelty nor compensation, but recognition: a demand that wrongdoing be named as wrongdoing, that belittlement be admitted as belittlement, and that the offended party be taken seriously. That claim helps explain a familiar pattern: anger may soften when a sincere acknowledgement appears, even when no punishment follows, while it may intensify when an injury is denied, minimised, or mocked. A key hinge in the argument is the difference between self-respect and self-esteem. Self-respect concerns standing as an equal person whose basic dignity should not be violated; self-esteem is more vulnerable to social comparison, appraisal, and prestige. This matters because anger that protects self-respect can be morally intelligible even when it is disruptive, while anger that protects a fragile superiority can become arrogant and socially corrosive. The paper's language of recognition helps clarify why some anger focuses on humiliation, degradation, and disrespect rather than on physical harm alone. A natural disaster can produce fear and grief, but it rarely produces anger in the same way, because anger is oriented toward intentionality, agency, and the sense of being treated as 'less than'. Anger is thus connected to moral injury: an experienced violation of status as a person who deserves equal regard. This approach also illuminates why anger is so easily politicised and scaled. Collective anger often presents itself as an answer to injustice, but it may also hide mixed motives: demands for equal respect can coexist with demands for special honour; resistance can coexist with the performance of superiority. In digital environments, such mixtures are intensified because platforms reward moral certainty, sharp antagonism, and public displays of injury. Anger can become identity, and identity can become a permanent readiness to take offence. The authors therefore recommend a practical ethical reorientation: instead of only

[12] Zhang, J., Xiong, Z., Zheng, H. and Ma, X. (2024) 'The Moral Psychological Justification of Anger: An Exploration of Self-Respect and Recognition', Behavioral Sciences (Basel), 15(1), 3. doi:10.3390/bs15010003.

asking whether anger ‘works’, attention should turn to what anger reveals about unmet recognition, damaged self-respect, and the social conditions that make acknowledgement hard. The aim is not to romanticise anger as justice, nor to pathologise it as irrationality, but to treat it as a diagnostic force that can be guided toward mutual recognition rather than escalated into hostility.

Conclusion

Anger exists because it once worked. As an evolutionary alarm, it evolved to signal unfairness, deter exploitation and restore balance within social relations where cooperation was essential and conflict costly. Its power lay in its episodic nature: anger was triggered by specific violations, mobilised corrective action and subsided once recalibration occurred. In digital societies, this logic is fundamentally disrupted. Communication systems continuously stimulate the anger response through symbolic cues, moral framings and algorithmic amplification while removing the conditions necessary for negotiation, accountability and closure. The alarm no longer points to a resolvable threat; it becomes a permanent background signal. What was designed to protect cooperation is repurposed into an infrastructure of attention, visibility and behavioural predictability. Anger persists today not because it still fulfils its original evolutionary function, but because digital systems exploit its alarm properties at scale. Understanding anger as an evolved mechanism clarifies both its historical necessity and its contemporary malfunction. The central challenge is therefore not to eliminate anger, but to redesign social and communicative environments so that an emotion meant to correct injustice does not become the condition through which injustice is endlessly reproduced.

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