

## Gender differences in anger expressions among secondary students

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### ABSTRACT

Individuals with choleric temperaments easily get angry and can be problematic if not expressed appropriately. The purpose of this study was to identify gender differences in anger expressions among secondary school students. Respondents were secondary school students in four states in the Northern region of Malaysia. A total of 3348 students were involved, including 1,800 males and 1,548 females. Respondents aged between 13 and 16 were randomly selected from 20 secondary schools. Descriptive analyses and t-test were used to identify anger expressions among secondary school students. Findings showed that 780 respondents agreed that they are hot-tempered, while 2568 others did not. From the 780 hot-tempered respondents, 370 are males and 410 are females. A total of 3160 from the 3348 respondents did not meet their school counsellors for counselling sessions when they had anger problems. The findings also revealed a significant difference in four types of anger expressions between male and female students. They were in aggressive, verbal, intrinsic anger expression, and intrinsic anger control. The findings revealed that school counsellors need to equip students with specific, creative, and innovative interventions to cope with different anger expression.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Anger is a normal reaction to threatening stimuli. To certain people, it is difficult to express anger in appropriate and acceptable ways. It ranges from mild annoyance to outright fury, a profound state of emotional discomfort [1]. Anger occurs when individuals have attributed blameworthiness to others [2]. Life factors that destroy the feelings of safety in children such as family divorce, poverty and numerous physical and emotional threats also have produced feelings of anger [3]. Most common cause of anger and reactive violence is interpersonal provocation [4]. Provocations are activities perceived as causing intentional harm to oneself or to significant others, such as unequal treatment or intentional thwarting of goals [4].

There are three main domains of anger [5]. The domains are cognitive, physiological and behavior. Cognitive dispositions include knowledge structures such as expectations and beliefs, and processes interpretation, while physiological dispositions include high hormone levels and low stimulus thresholds for arousal activation; and behavioral dispositions include variously learned repertoires of anger-expressive behavior, including aggression but also avoidance behavior. The two types of anger are temporary and trait anger [6].

Temporary anger appears based on a certain situation and its severity varies according to the degree of assault, unfairness, or frustration that the individual perceives. Trait anger, on the other hand, is defined as perceiving numerous situations or an environment as boring or frustrating, and consequently, having tendency of experiencing more common temporary anger. Anger can be expressed as an anger-in, anger-out and anger control [7]. Anger-in means keeping anger under stress and not expressing it, whereas anger-out is expressed either physically by hitting and hurting objects, or orally by swearing, affronting, or criticizing. Anger-control means a general tendency to behave in a patient, calm, tolerant and understanding manner, and mainly to control anger and to calm down. Feeling of anger that has been recognized and tried to be expressed is an effective, usable, and productive behavior [8], while unexpressed anger might prompt dissatisfaction rather than maintaining or strengthening relationships [9]. Therefore, expressing anger is important for anger management [10].

Anger also leads to aggression [11]. If left untreated, it predicts social adjustment difficulties and may lead to additional antisocial behavior [12]. Reactive aggression (RA) is often described as 'hot-tempered,' capturing the essential features of strong negative emotions, a visceral defensive response to perceived threat or provocation [13]. Adolescents who engaged in reactive aggression were more socially anxious [14]. However, anger is not necessarily accompanied by aggression and result in negative outcomes. Anger can provide rewards through social reinforcement, relief from negative stimuli, and provision of concrete rewards [15].

Anger also found difficult to be managed by adolescents [16]. Study on anger among adolescents in Malaysia had been conducted by Nasir and Ghani [17]. Their study involved 1162 adolescents (552 male and 610 female) between the ages of 14 to 16 in selected public schools in Selangor province, West Malaysia. Results revealed nearly everyone had experienced of anger. According to their study, when angry, 7.1% adolescent hit other people while 25.1% resort to hitting objects while 27.8% became aggressive verbally or cursing, more than 50% seemed to have regretted expressing their anger while 44.7% felt like asking for forgiveness and majority or 64.5% of the adolescents' resort to calming themselves when they felt angry.

The level of anger and anger expression may be a risk factor for depression and aggression among children and adolescents [18]. Previous studies on anger showed different anger expressions among males and females. Males found to be more difficult in self-control and aggressive, while females had prolonged anger related to negative self-evaluation [19]. Females also suppress anger in order to meet the standards of feminine ideals [20]. According to Robinson and Segal [21], female adolescents usually express their anger verbally rather than physically, while male adolescents are more likely to throw objects, kick doors, or punch the walls when they are angry. Anger is described as an outburst of heated anger. When a person is angry, the body releases stress hormones such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol, which increase the heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature and breathing rate [22]. These will cause physical health problems and lead to emotional and mental problems.

Since different genders express anger differently, the findings of the present study in Malaysia are important in helping schools to plan appropriate and effective intervention. Findings from this study will be collected using an instrument developed on the sociocultural context of Malaysia and thus findings related to the expression of anger among students in Malaysia. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify anger expressions among secondary school students. Three specific objectives were put forward to identify: 1) Hot temperedness among school students; 2) Students' readiness to meet school counsellors to express anger; and 3) Gender differences in expressions of anger. Secondary school students, who were in adolescent development phase, were involved as the respondents in this study. Adolescence is a very important period in one's life as during this time they start to have a place in the adult world and try to create their own relation manner [23].

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

### **2.1. Research design**

The present study adopted a descriptive-survey research. This design is useful to describe frequencies and types of anger expression among secondary school students. In this study, the frequencies of easily hot-tempered students and students' readiness to meet school counsellors while having anger problems were retrieved, while gender differences in anger expressions among secondary school students were also identified.

### **2.2. Respondents**

Findings from this study were collected from 3,348 secondary school students. The sample consisted of 1,800 (53.8%) males and 1,548 (46.2%) females who participated voluntarily in the study. The respondents involved were between 13 and 16 years of age during the conduction of this study. This research

was conducted using two-stage sampling. Firstly, we identify four northern part states of Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak, Malaysia. These nearby states were chosen in order to facilitate the data collection. After that the researchers obtain information on potential schools for each state from State Educational Department. Finally, twenty schools were randomly chosen in this study. Four schools in the state of Perlis and Perak, respectively, while five schools in Kedah and seven schools in Penang.

### 2.3. Research instruments

A questionnaire used is self-developed consisting of three parts. First part is on demographic backgrounds, second part consisted two items on closed ended questions and the third part consisted of Adolescent Anger Instrument (AAI) [24]. With the aim of answering objective no 1 and 2, students needed to response 'Yes' or 'No' for the closed ended questions. The two items asked on whether they are a hot-tempered person and their readiness to meet school counsellors while having anger problem. To answer objective no 3 on the types of anger expression, the AAI [24] was used. AAI has 35 items with three domains that are anger-out, anger-in and anger-control. The instrument [24] starts with phrase "When I am angry, I will...". The domain of anger-out consists construct of aggressive and verbal expression. The Example for aggressive item is "start fight" and verbal item is "belittle others". Domain of anger-in consist of passive anger expression. Example for passive anger item is "repress feelings". While domain of anger-control consists of extrinsic and intrinsic ways to control anger. Example of extrinsic control anger item is "hang out" and intrinsic control anger is "talk positive into self". The instrument uses the Likert Scale with four ranges namely, 1=rarely, 2=occasionally, 3=frequently, 4=very frequently. The overall reliability of the instrument is 0.84, while reliability for each construct is 0.78 for aggressive, 0.74 for verbal, 0.77 for intrinsic, 0.81 for extrinsic and 0.76 for passive construct.

### 2.4. Data collection

Approval to conduct the research was obtained from Education Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia and the Education Departments in the four states. A letter of permission was sent to all the selected schools by the school principal. The letter and the questionnaires were attached together with a letter of approval from Education Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia and the Education Department. The questionnaires were sent to twenty selected schools in northern region of Malaysia. All respondents were selected randomly with the help of school counsellors. School counsellors assist with the questionnaires and returned to the researcher once they had been completed. They also help provide instruction on the instrument and informed respondents about the study objectives. The students were given approximately 20 to 30 minutes to answer the questionnaires. However, some of the schools requested the researchers to come personally to conduct the questionnaires.

### 2.5. Data analysis

All the 3,348 questionnaire copies were analyzed using the descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage). In particular, the independent sample *t*-test was used to examine the difference of anger expressions according to gender. Data were analyzed to seek information on the following aspects: 1) Hot temperedness among school students; 2) Students' readiness to meet school counsellors to express anger; and 3) Gender differences in expressions of anger. Since the number of respondents is big, missing data was dealt using command from IBM SPSS. Firstly, the missing value was assigned with the value of -1. After that the value of -1 was entered in the discrete missing value section in the variable tab. By doing this, IBM SPSS will omit the value from further analysis.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Hot-temperedness by gender

Table 1 shows that 780 respondents said yes that they were hot-tempered, while 2568 others indicated otherwise. Of the 780 hot-tempered respondents, 370 were males and 410 were females. Among the secondary school students, 1431 males said that they were not hot-tempered, while among female secondary school students, 1137 said they were not. Descriptively, this study found majority of the school students in northern region of Malaysia did not easily become hot-tempered.

The finding complements the study by Lamb, *et al.* [25] on levels of anger among 624 rural high school students that reported total anger score stable overtime. However, the cultural history of the expressers also seems to affect the results [26]. They said that East Asian adolescents are emotionally inexpressive, as compared to European Americans who are emotionally expressive. They predicted that anger would have a stronger signaling value if East Asians, rather than European American, expressed it. The existence of ethnic disparities in the disciplinary approaches often determine how adolescents handle their displays of anger.

Meanwhile, the research of Steele, Elliott, and Phipps [27] demonstrated that Black children display lower levels of anger expressivity and higher levels of anger control compared to White children. The East Asian (Eastern) world tends to be collectivist where each person focuses on the community and group to which they belong, and what is best for everyone over themselves [28]. It leads to a strong support network that assists adolescents convey feelings such as hot-tempered.

Table 1. Hot-temperedness by gender

Hot-temperedness	Yes	No
Males	370	1431
Females	410	1137
Total	780	2568

### 3.2. Readiness to meet school counsellors while in anger

Table 2 shows a total of 3160 of 3348 respondents said no to the readiness to meet their school counsellors to get help when they had an anger problem. Only 188 students said yes to meet their school counsellor. From the total of 188 students who met the school counsellors, only 108 were male and 80 were female students. However, the majority of 1692 males and 1468 females did not meet the school counsellors.

Table 2. Readiness to meet school counsellors while in anger

Readiness to meet school counsellors	Yes	No
Males	108	1692
Females	80	1468
Total	188	3160

This result indicates that majority of the students did not meet and consult their school counsellors while in anger. On the contrary, only 5.6% of the students were ready to meet the counsellor if they had anger problem. This is in line with the finding that stated East Asians adolescents are emotionally inexpressive and unwilling to share their feelings due to different cultures and social backgrounds from those in the Western countries [23]. With the nature of emotionally inexpressive, students hardly meet a counsellor while encountering anger. Although the school has a qualified counsellor who can offer the best intervention to manage anger, it will be ineffective if the students are not ready for counselling [29]. Students' readiness is the main factor which helps to explain this finding. Howells and Day [30] highlighted a number of things that may have an impact on the readiness to respond to anger, such as anger inferences, self-righteousness attitudes, low personal responsibility, students' skill levels, and students' belief in the impact of counselling interventions. All these aspects need to be considered in order to explain the lesser number of students seeking for counselling assistance in dealing with their anger problem. At the same time, school counsellors also need to aggressively promote their services and diversify their services in creative and innovative ways.

Blended approaches such as a combination of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Art Therapy are one of the best suggestions to manage anger among students. Previous research [31] suggested Cognitive-Behavioural Treatment as anger therapeutic activities, evaluation of reframing dysfunctional cognitions, role-playing, imaginary exposure, and behavioural rehearsals and homework experiments. With role plays, individual adolescents can learn how to solve problems and develop non-hostile attributions in response to hypothetical situations of conflicts [12]. In addition, role plays are arranged for adolescents so that they are gradually exposed to greater levels of provocation and conflicts as their skills grow.

Nonverbal aspects of the art therapy have also been found to be helpful. These are suitable for individuals who are unwilling or unable to talk about their personal issues [32]. While rock music example can give adolescents the opportunity to express themselves to be in contact with each other and share their feelings of anger, rage, grief, longing, and psychological disintegration. Music also gives adolescents the opportunity to experience closeness and isolation and to explore their sexual fantasies and feelings [33]. Creative art therapies differ in their experiential and non-verbal character from other therapies. Characteristic of the art therapy is the methodical use of means of art as drawing, painting, collage, and sculpture to shape and express feelings, thoughts, and memories [34]. Therefore, art therapy is also one of the suggested interventions to manage anger among school students instead of other therapy such as the Cognitive Behaviour therapy. Affordable, promising results, proper education and specific training may help individual cope better, while support should be provided for restoring wellbeing through various skill-training programmes [35].

### 3.3. Different anger expressions according to gender

The mean scores of anger expressions of male and female students were 1.79 (SD=0.40) and 1.73 (SD=0.44) respectively. Results from Table 3, the independent sample t-test showed that this difference was significant [ $t(3346)=-9.233$ ,  $p=.000$ ]. In particular, the significant difference between male and female students were in the four types of anger expressions. They were in aggressive,  $t(3346)=9.125$ ,  $p=.000$ ; verbal,  $t(3346)=-16.856$ ,  $p=.000$ ; intrinsic,  $t(3346)=-4.788$ ,  $p=.000$ ; and passive,  $t(3346)=-9.978$ ,  $p=.000$ . However, the findings showed no significant difference in the extrinsic anger between the male and female students.

Table 3. Different anger expressions according to gender

	T	df	Sig.	Mean difference
Aggressive	9.215	3346	0.000	4.722
Verbal	-16.856	3346	0.000	-11.774
Intrinsic	-4.788	3346	0.000	-3.687
Extrinsic	-1.290	3346	0.197	-0.982
Passive	-9.978	3346	.000	-9.155
Overall	-9.233	3346	.000	-20.877

These findings showed males had higher level of anger than females. These contradict with the research finding by Suter, *et al.* [36] that indicated a high level of anger in their female sample because of a higher incidence of psychopathology. The different finding according to Pouwels, Lansu, and Cillessen [37] is related to gender-specific norms for certain behavior, example males and females socialize differently. They also claimed that females are more motivated to show emphatic behavior and behave prosocial than males, males' aggressive behavior is more tolerated than female's aggressive behavior. Meanwhile, individuals who lack self-confidence and are unwilling to take responsibility also have high levels of trait anger, anger-out and anger-in [8].

The finding also showed significant differences between the male and female students in emotional expressions. This can be traced to social processes such as dissimilar gender roles, status, and power imbalances and differing socialization histories of males and females [38]. These processes may influence some males and females to express emotions differently in some cultures and in some contexts. This may be enlightened by gender-specific norms of empathy, prosocial behavior and aggression [39]. Male students may believe anger expression as an appropriate response to certain situations and catharsis is the best method rather than controlling the emotion. This might be the rationale mean score for the male students to be highly and significantly different compared to female students in their expressive anger specifically in aggressive type. Whereas, female students are expected to possess high level of communal attribute, being friendly, unselfish, concern with others, and emotionally expressive [40]. This finding is unchanging the gender-specific norms that male students are masculine and more accepted with aggression expressive type.

However, in the other expressive types such as verbal, intrinsic, and passive, female students scored significantly higher compared to male students. This finding is consistent with previous studies which showed females as having more control over anger than males [41]. It is also consistent with the finding that there is greater control of anger and lower outward anger among females [42]. Females are more verbally expressive of anger and societal restrictions on behavior than their male counterpart [25]. If a person is not allowed, or is unable to express anger outwardly, anger turns inward may lead to depression, guilt shame, anxiety, or lethargy [43]. In addition, prolonged anger may develop suicidal tendencies [44]. A high level of anger is an important concurrent marker for adolescents who may be at risk of committing suicidal behavior [45]. This finding shows that anger must be expressed and managed through appropriate intervention in order to avoid other negative and harmful effects.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The present study summarized that majority of school students in the northern region of Malaysia were not easily hot-tempered. However, due to the limitations of this study, it cannot be generalized to all school students in Malaysia. As majority of the students did not seek help while in anger, school counsellors need to take proactive and drastic actions to assist and encourage students to join counselling sessions. Moreover, misunderstanding of counselling services should be avoided and counsellors need to create a therapeutic atmosphere for students in need.

This study has also provided useful information for counsellors, educators, and health practitioners by clarifying the differences in anger expressions between male and female students. In addition, it may help stakeholders to develop anger management programmes on specific expressions of anger based on anger-out,

anger-in and anger control. It would be helpful if counsellors could equip students with specific skills to cope with the different anger expressions and manage their anger issues positively. Finally, directive approaches such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and creative expressive art therapy are the best suggested combination of approaches for students to manage their anger.

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