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Virginia Eatough, Jonathan A. Smith and Rachel Shaw

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# Women, Anger, and Aggression

## An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Virginia Eatough

Jonathan A. Smith

*Birkbeck University of London*

Rachel Shaw

*Aston University*

This study reports a qualitative phenomenological investigation of anger and anger-related aggression in the context of the lives of individual women. Semistructured interviews with five women are analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. This inductive approach aims to capture the richness and complexity of the lived experience of emotional life. In particular, it draws attention to the context-dependent and relational dimension of angry feelings and aggressive behavior. Three analytic themes are presented here: the subjective experience of anger, which includes the perceptual confusion and bodily change felt by the women when angry, crying, and the presence of multiple emotions; the forms and contexts of aggression, paying particular attention to the range of aggressive strategies used; and anger as moral judgment, in particular perceptions of injustice and unfairness. The authors conclude by examining the analytic observations in light of phenomenological thinking.

**Keywords:** *anger; aggression; qualitative; women; interpretative phenomenological analysis*

This study employs an existential phenomenological perspective to examine women's lived experiences of anger and anger-related aggression. We propose that human beings are intrinsically embedded in the world and that we come to make sense of ourselves and others through our world dealings. The study aims to understand women's subjective experiences of anger, the various forms it takes, and the contexts in which it is expressed to demonstrate its relational and being-in-the-world nature. First, we will provide a necessarily brief overview of some of the relevant aggression and anger literature.

Women's physical and verbal aggression is often framed within a sex-related differences domain, as summarized in a number of comprehensive narrative and meta-analytic reviews (Archer, 2002; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Frodi, Macauley, & Ropert Thome, 1977; Hyde, 1984; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Björkqvist and Niemelä (1992) state that it is "not correct to make inferences about 'physical aggression' or 'psychological harm' from such work, however valuable the information they may give in other respects" (p. 7). They suggest that more important questions to ask include if women and men are equally motivated to inflict harm, what are the conditions they will or will not be aggressive, and in what contexts are particular aggressive strategies more likely to be displayed than others. We propose that phenomenological work is particularly well suited to addressing these questions because it is able to tap into the complex contextual nuances of anger and aggressive behavior.

Given that physical aggression is not typically a first choice strategy for either women or men, the predominant focus on it has severely limited social psychological understanding of human aggression (Björkqvist & Niemelä, 1992). The developing literature on indirect aggression goes some way in addressing this anomaly. Research thus far has identified behaviors such as gossiping and spreading rumors, exclusion from groups, abusive messages, and using code names when saying something nasty about someone (Björkqvist, 1994; Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1994a, 1994b; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000).

At present, the empirical evidence convincingly points to a female preference for indirect aggression strategies with temporal changes in aggressive style linked to developmental maturation. It seems that acquisition of verbal and communication skills enables individuals to use more sophisticated aggression strategies, with direct physical aggression becoming a less viable option as one gets older. Although empirical evidence is limited as yet, what there is seems to strongly support this assumption (Walker, Richardson, & Green, 2000).

The study of indirect aggression has led to a richer understanding of the forms of aggressive strategies available to women. However, methodologically, the emphasis has been on "detecting" differing amounts of different types of aggressive behavior. As important as this is, little is said about why indirect aggression is used/preferred, what meanings the behavior has, and in what contexts it is most likely to occur. Given the intentional nature of emotion—we do not simply experience anger but anger at someone or something—it is crucial to unravel the complex processes at work between people and the world around them when attempting to understand the fundamentally interpersonal act of indirect aggression. As argued elsewhere,

“emotion experiences are often world-focused rather than self-focused—they are directed outwards towards the world, and the people, events and objects that make up that world” (Eatough & Smith, 2006, p. 484).

In addition to the studies referred to earlier, there is the recent work that examines sex-related differential beliefs about aggression (Archer & Haigh, 1997a, 1997b; Campbell & Muncer, 1987; Campbell, Muncer, & Coyle, 1992). This work loosely locates its findings within the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1963), which aims to explain how social knowledge and practices are constructed, transformed, and distributed within the social world. People agree on and share representations, one consequence being that shared representations permit identification of homogenous groups. Campbell and Muncer (1987) analyzed social talk and concluded that women and men have different implicit models of their own and others' aggression. From this, the EXPAAG measure was developed, which by and large supported initial findings. They suggested that women subscribe to an expressive social representation of aggression, whereas men's social representations are instrumental. Women experience aggressive behavior as anxiety provoking and unpleasant, a release of tension yet a loss of control. Men perceive it as a challenge and an exercise in social control through which social rewards (respect and material rewards) can be gained. Later revised versions of EXPAAG (Archer & Haigh, 1997b) found that although women prisoners were significantly more likely to adhere to expressive social representations, no sex-related differences were found with respect to instrumental representations and physical aggression (physical or verbal aggression) (Archer & Haigh, 1997a).

Many anger scales exist that are designed to measure anger experience and expression (Knight, Ross, Collins, & Parmenter, 1985; Novaco, 1975; Spielberger, 1988; Van Goozen, Frijda, & Van de Poll, 1994; see Eckhardt, Norlander, & Deffenbacher, 2002, for a recent review). Typical scenarios involve asking participants to rate how angry they would be in response to statements such as “someone ripping off your automobile antenna” (Novaco, 1975) or “you have just found out someone has told lies about you” (Knight et al., 1985). Participants' responses to these hypothetical scenarios are used to generate predictive indices of actual behavior. Quantification of the anger experience means it is not possible to say anything about the unique meaning of being angry for individual women or the complex ways in which contexts construct anger and shape responses to it. It has been suggested that measures such as these “serve only rudimentary research and clinical needs” and that anger “loses some of its essential meaning as individuals' own most salient triggers and unique response go uninvestigated” (Cox, Stabb, & Bruckner,

1999, p. 97). Similarly, Eckhardt et al. (2002) advocate that researchers move beyond these traditional endorsement measures in the attempt to better capture the anger experience.

Likewise, Averill (1983) draws attention to how anger is a powerful interpersonal emotion that typically occurs between people who have a close and caring bond. He found that from a total of 116 self-reported anger episodes, only 21% involved a stranger or someone who was well known and disliked. The overwhelmingly majority of anger episodes happened between people who had close interpersonal ties. That our close intimate relationships should generate anger more than other contexts is hardly surprising. There is more opportunity, people are more likely to care about and feel hurt over the actions of loved ones, and they are likely to feel more confident and secure about expressing anger. Tapping into the complexity of these relational contexts is difficult for experimental and psychometric research. An existential–phenomenological approach focuses explicitly on the lived experience of anger, including the ways in which our social worlds shape the experience and expression of this complex emotion.

There are a small number of qualitative and/or phenomenologically oriented investigations of women's anger (Fields et al., 1998; Munhall, 1993; Thomas, 1991, 1995, 2001). Jack's (2001) descriptive analysis of semistructured interviews with 60 women identified six ways in which women either brought anger into a relationship (e.g., indirectly, by masking anger meant that they did not confront what they believed to be the cause of their anger) or kept it out (e.g., consciously and constructively, which led to positive feelings about their anger). These relational patterns provide important insights into the various behavioral strategies women use to express their anger. However, it should be noted that 36 out of the 60 women had been abused as children, as adults, or both. It is not clear from the analysis whether these women had difficulties with adaptive anger expression. Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, and Benton (1990, 1992) have analyzed the anger experience using Haug's (1987) memory-work method. They concluded that the anger experience is different for women because of the power differential between women and men. For men, anger is empowering because they have more power, and being angry ensures the continuation of that power especially if it is accompanied by threats and/or violence. Women's anger, on the other hand, emerges out of feelings of frustration and powerlessness.

This study aims to contribute to existing qualitative studies of women's anger and anger-related aggression through a hermeneutic phenomenological and idiographic analysis of women's life worlds. It is the explicit objective of

phenomenological psychological approaches to capture the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation through a close and fine-grained examination of individual accounts and the meanings produced within those accounts. Our aim is to show the value of this approach for understanding anger and anger-related aggression.

The data are analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Eatough, 2006). IPA is one of several allied phenomenological psychology perspectives, and its central concern is the subjective conscious experiences of individuals. This is in contrast to grounded theory analysis, which gives greater weight to social structures and processes than individualized “insider perspective” accounts. IPA acknowledges that it is not possible to access an individual’s life world directly because there is no clear and unmediated window into that life. Investigating how events and objects are experienced and given meaning requires interpretative activity on the part of the participant and the researcher. This “double hermeneutic” is described as a dual process in which “the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). A core feature of IPA is its idiographic emphasis, and this inevitably has an impact on sample size. Although studies range between 1 and 30, the norm is toward the lower end (Eatough & Smith, 2008). IPA has now been used to examine a wide range of psychological topics, for example, European social identity (Chrysochoou, 2000), affective aspects of travel choice (Mann & Abraham, 2006), awareness in Alzheimer’s disease (Clare, 2003), and identity change and life transitions (Smith, 1994). For a review of work in IPA, see Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005) and Brocki and Wearden (2006).

## Method

### Participants

Five female participants were interviewed twice, and they are referred to as Julie, Debbie, Alison, Cathy, and Tanya. The women lived in an inner-city area of the East Midlands, U.K., which is categorized as extreme in terms of social need (Gardner et al., 2004). The city comprises 82 zones that reflect locally identifiable communities. Nineteen of these communities are identified as experiencing extreme social need, with more than half of these being inner-city areas. There are correspondingly high levels of crime. Age range was 28 to 32, and all were married or cohabiting at the time of interview.

With the exception of Alison, the women had at least one child. Alison's husband had a child from a previous relationship, and Alison was involved in his upbringing. Julie and Alison worked outside the home, part-time and full-time, respectively.

## Data Collection

A mail drop asking for volunteers to participate in a study on how women experience anger and resolve conflict in their lives was carried out. A purposive sampling strategy was used, which emphasizes recruiting participants for whom the topic being investigated has relevance and personal significance. Thus, the first five women who met this criterion of fitting the age range and being married or cohabiting were recruited. After an initial telephone conversation, the first author met participants in their homes to discuss what the study involved. Written consent was obtained, and participants were given full and complete information about the research, and it was made clear that they had the right to withdraw at any time and request their interviews to be destroyed. Subsequently, an interview schedule was developed, and each woman was interviewed twice over a period of 3 weeks. Topics covered a comprehensive description of actual anger episodes, their meaning for the participants, and how they made sense of them. They were also asked about the different strategies they used to resolve conflict. However, the questions were used to guide rather than dictate the course of the interview. Participants were treated as experiential experts, and any novel areas of inquiry they opened up were followed. Data collection lasted approximately 18 weeks and resulted in 15 to 18 hr of data. The interviews were conducted by the first author in the women's home and were recorded onto a minidisk recorder. All interviews were transcribed verbatim using a simplified form of transcription.

## Analysis

Analysis involved treating the two interviews for each participant as one set of data or one transcript. Given that the purpose of the second interview was to clarify, explore in more detail, and reflect on events described in the first interview, it was appropriate to analyze the two interviews together. Moreover, the fact that the second interview was carried out within 2 weeks of the initial one meant that not enough time had elapsed to expect any major shifts in the description and sense making of the anger and aggression

episodes in their lives. Indeed, the degree of stability across the set of interviews for each woman was striking, highlighting how interviews that aim to elicit stories result in accounts anchored in concrete events, which have an ongoing significance in the life of the individual.

IPA is not a prescriptive approach; rather, it provides a set of flexible guidelines that can be adapted by individual researchers in light of their research aims (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Stages used throughout the analysis were as follows: The transcript was read several times and the left-hand margin was used to make notes of anything that appeared significant and of interest. With each reading, the researcher should expect to feel more “wrapped up” in the data, becoming more responsive to what is being said. The second stage involved returning to the transcript afresh and using the right-hand margin to transform initial notes and ideas into more specific themes or phrases, which calls on psychological concepts and abstractions. This process moves between inductive and deductive positions; the participant’s account can bring to light issues unanticipated by the researcher and his or her questions, and the researcher taking a theoretically sensitive stance begins to think about how these issues can be conceptualized. For IPA, this interplay means that as the analysis progresses, existing psychological theory can be endorsed, modified, and/or challenged. At this stage of analysis, caution is essential so that the connection between the participant’s own words and the researcher’s interpretations is not lost. These early stages of analysis require the researcher to be thorough and painstaking; the third stage consists of further reducing the data by establishing connections between the preliminary themes and clustering them appropriately. These clusters are given a descriptive label (higher order theme title) that conveys the conceptual nature of the themes therein. Smith (2004) suggests that researchers “imagine a magnet with some of the themes pulling others in and helping to make sense of them” (p. 71).

Finally, a table is produced that shows each higher order theme and the subthemes that compose it (Table 1). A brief illustrative data extract is presented alongside each theme. For the researcher, this table is the outcome of an iterative process in which he or she has moved back and forth between the various analytic stages ensuring that the integrity of what the participant said has been preserved as much as possible. If the researcher has been successful, it should be possible for someone else to track the analytic journey from the raw data through to the end table. An “independent audit” of this type was conducted (Smith, 1996).



**Table 1**  
**Table of Themes**

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Superordinate Theme 1: The subjective experience of anger	
Subtheme 1: Bodily experience of anger	
Debbie	I went red hot and it's like I was having a hot flush.
Julie	I did see red, red was in my eyes.
Alison	When I get angry, I start shaking.
Cathy	I'm just feeling totally sick inside.
Tanya	If I'm really angry, it's a big adrenalin rush.
Subtheme 2: Escalation of anger	
Debbie	It'll just build up in the day.
Julie	I just end up building all the anger up inside me.
Alison	I mean it builds up, builds up.
Tanya	I blow up quite quickly.
Subtheme 3: Crying/frustration accompanying anger	
Debbie	I just broke up into tears.
Julie	Slapping him into a corner crying my eyes out.
Alison	All I did was lay and cry and cry.
Cathy	I either have to be sobbing in the quiet.
Tanya	But I was really crying, really upset.
Subtheme 4: Anger and other emotions/feelings	
Debbie	With the first punch it made me feel so happy
Julie	I've felt guilty.
Alison	Then the anger turns into guilt.
Cathy	Living with guilt.
Tanya	Anger but it was mixed with real hurt.
Superordinate Theme 2: Forms and contexts of aggression	
Subtheme 1: Direct physical aggression	
Debbie	I was just punching and kicking her.
Julie	I smashed it into the side of his head.
Alison	I smacked him enough and kicked him.
Subtheme 2: Direct verbal aggression	
Debbie	I do swear and out come the curses.
Julie	Nasty things like I wish he was dead.
Alison	I'm going to knock ten piles of shit out of you.
Cathy	You've just got to let it out by shouting.
Tanya	I'm aggressive shouting.
Subtheme 3: Indirect aggression	
Debbie	So I just blanked him.
Julie	So I do it by secret.
Tanya	I ordered about £400 of stuff and he got the bill.

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*(continued)*

**Table 1 (continued)**


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Subtheme 4: Aggressive fantasies	
Debbie	I had visions of me just picking up the nearest knife.
Julie	I wanted to strangle her physically.
Alison	I had visions of getting a knife and stabbing him.
Cathy	If I just run her over or set fire to her house.
Superordinate Theme 3: Anger as moral judgment	
Subtheme 1: Anger caused by perceived injustice	
Debbie	They had the same color blood as me.
Julie	Nobody has the right to rip a little boy's picture.
Alison	I will not get the blame.
Tanya	You're not doing it to her.
Subtheme 2: Anger as response to rule violation	
Debbie	He'd gone back on it.
Julie	I couldn't believe he'd gone and done it.
Alison	If I've done something wrong, I will admit it.
Cathy	I'm very big on the truth thing.
Tanya	Not again and you're not doing it to her.

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The analytic process reworks and refines researcher understandings and interpretations in an iterative fashion until some degree of closure is reached. Finally, a narrative account of the interplay between the interpretative activity of the researcher and the participant's account of the experience in his or her own words is produced. Analysis continues into this formal process of writing up. The researcher should aim to provide a close textual reading of the participant's account, moving between description and different levels of interpretation, at all times clearly differentiating between them. Enough data should be presented for the reader to assess the fit between the participant's accounts and the researcher's understanding of them. It is important that this understanding is coherent and integrated; nuances from the participant's accounts should be retained, while at the same time they should be embedded in a framework that accounts for the phenomenon under investigation (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999).

## Results

Three superordinate themes derived from the IPA are presented. These themes are akin to a natural history description; they aim to provide a rich

descriptive account of the breadth and complexity of women's anger and aggression. The themes are as follows:

- the subjective experience of anger,
- the forms and contexts of aggression, and
- anger as moral judgment.

## The Subjective Experience of Anger

In this section, we draw attention to some of the features common to the participants' rich descriptions of the anger experience.

*What anger feels like.* For all the women, a central feature of feeling angry was perceptual confusion and bodily change:

I just remember like seeing dots in front of my face, in front of my eyes and everything just went red. . . . It was all this rage, I went red hot and it's like I was having a hot flush or something and I just felt that I'd got to hit her. (Debbie)

Anger is felt as a hot flush, which generates heat throughout Debbie's body. Typically, hot flushes are unpleasant sensations, and in the context of being angry, the feeling intensifies the negative emotion experience. This feeling produces and/or accompanies "hot" cognitions, which at least in part are experienced and mediated through her body. The dots in front of the eyes and face indicate intense feeling, suggesting a disruption in Debbie's normal way of being-in-the-world. For Julie, the heat manifests itself through sweating:

I see red you know when people do say they see red I *did* see red, red was in my eyes I could see a red glaze and I was sweating. (Julie)

Similar to Debbie's dots, Julie experiences a red glaze. Arguably, both signify a loss of clarity and/or cognitive and behavioral management as they are caught up in the angry moment. Alison's anger was invariably accompanied by shaking and a loss of bodily control:

When I get angry I start shaking, and when I start shaking, tears start coming down and then my arms start moving and then my legs. (Alison)

For Tanya, the anger experience feels like a “rush” that peaks:

I blow up quite quickly and then that’s it. It’s a bit of a release I suppose of energy. That’s why I think I cry at the end because if I’m really angry, it’s a big adrenalin rush. (Tanya)

The experience points to the temporal dimension of anger events as the emotion runs its course. In contrast, Cathy’s anger expresses itself through internal body turmoil:

I’m just feeling totally sick inside, my emotions are whooshing, just like twisting, horrible, sick, I feel really really sick. (Cathy)

Several times Cathy referred to experiencing her anger as “twisting” her insides, and this description was always accompanied by a concomitant cognitive shift in which she would feel her “head losing focus” and experience a sense of being “crazy.”

The colors red and, to a lesser extent, white were important descriptive features in the women’s talk about anger. Both colors signify heat (red hot, white heat) and convey, alongside the bodily feelings, the power of the anger experience:

I don’t know what it is when I get angry, it’s like my head’s going to explode. I, I see red, I really do see richly red before my eyes, and I don’t know I get this extra energy from somewhere. (Julie)

Red is not simply a representation of heat; it symbolizes extreme danger and uncontrollability. Seeing “richly red” and through a “red glaze” gives Julie’s anger an almost tangible quality. Her head feels as if it will explode, and like Tanya, she is aware of being energized. This explosive imagery suggests volatility and instability, a disruption from the normal state of affairs, both bodily and psychologically.

*Crying.* In addition to hot flushes, sweating, and shaking, the women’s anger was accompanied by crying. Typically, this relationship was perceived as both unintentional and as a more or less normal state of affairs. The women cried for many reasons and in a wide variety of contexts. Oftentimes, it was a response to feelings of frustration, loneliness, or feeling powerless, as well as an attempt to manage and control one’s anger or a desire for relief.

Indeed, it can be all of these (and more) in a single crying episode. Previously, Cathy had been in an abusive relationship, and crying became her way of managing her anger rather than responding aggressively:

I think I learned how to control my anger then. I couldn't attack him, back on the couple of occasions at the beginning where I did it was certainly made known to me that I shouldn't do that ever again, day light looks like you're never going to see that again. That's where you'd cry under the stairs and bang your head against the wall rather than being aggressive. (Cathy)

Cathy's abusive relationship meant that her anger had to be expressed privately, and this pattern of removing herself so that her anger remains hidden is continued as an explicit mechanism for anger management in her current relationship.

Alison illustrates the multidetermined nature of crying in her account of how she had felt intensely angry by the death of her daughter. She is recounting a particular night when she felt overwhelmed with these feelings of anger but felt unable to wake her husband:

I didn't know what to do and it was building up and building up and building up. I just didn't know what to do. I wanted to wake him up and shake him, strangle him, do something, just to and I couldn't. Like I wanted to scream, I wanted to, I wanted to hit, I wanted to do something horrible, I wanted to just like arrrrgh you know. And I couldn't so all I did was lay and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry. And it was frustration, sheer frustration because I wanted to let these feelings out. (Alison)

Alison's crying is elicited by an amalgam of different emotions and feeling states. There is frustration at having to suppress her emotions, and it seems that the crying is in no small part a response to feeling silenced. It is interesting that Alison indicates that her crying also provides a sense of control, which seems counterintuitive until the context is considered:

Eventually yeah, eventually it all came out but erm, it took a bit of a while. I mean me crying all night you know it took a bit of a while to get rid of it, eventually. But it did it did frighten me because I thought you know if I'd have woken him up I don't know what I'd have done . . . but I managed I managed to control the anger inside by crying. (Alison)

Crying not only brings some measure of release from her intense emotions but also acts as a control. If she did not cry, the consequences might be worse. However, we would argue that notwithstanding a sense of control,

this complex mix is also likely to give rise to feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. This claim can be made for the other participants in very different circumstances. For example, Julie describes a physical fight with her partner in which her crying appears to be a response to these feelings:

He turned round and erm he punched me so I just ended up slapping him into a corner crying my eyes out so I looked even more stupid when he's seen that.  
(Julie)

This fight had involved Julie picking up a kitchen knife to stab her partner in the back. It is not clear whether Julie was crying before he punched her or whether the crying is a response to physical pain, fear, and/or frustration at being thwarted in her goal. What is evident is that this crying episode does not bring relief, but rather, it gives rise to feelings of stupidity and possibly humiliation. This example draws on more commonsense interpretations of crying as a demonstration of weakness, impotence even, but Alison's and Cathy's accounts illustrate that crying can become an active mechanism for controlling anger.

*Fluid (and multiple) emotions.* Unsurprisingly, it seems that emotions and feeling states rarely appear in any "pure" form. The participants in this study talked of experiencing multiple emotions and emotional shifts within a single conflict event. Cathy described "living in guilt" after angry outbursts, and similarly for Alison, guilt typically followed anger:

I always feel guilt after, it comes back as guilt. The anger then turns into guilt.  
(Alison)

There is a similar transformation of feeling for Julie, which she indicates is due to retrospectively reflecting on her actions and their possible consequences. In the extract below, she describes how she felt the morning after a public brawl with another woman:

That I shouldn't have done it. Because I thought if there is any repercussions where are Alex and Matthew [her children] going to be? . . . Then I start to think, feel guilty so I find myself buying Alex and Matthew presents because they don't know what they've done but they've got it anyway because I've felt guilty because I just don't know how else other to do it than saying I knew I'd done wrong. (Julie)

Julie makes an explicit statement of regret at the outset because she is aware how her behavior might have had negative repercussions for her children.

In addition, she feels guilt and attempts to make amends and/or assuage her guilt by buying gifts. It is not unusual to give some sort of token in this context even when the recipient is unaware as to the reason why. This course of action enables the individual to feel better about themselves as well as wanting to negate any actual or imagined harm.

Similarly, Debbie described a fight she had with another woman when she was in her early 20s. Her anger and aggression were intermingled with happiness:

I just laid into her and with the first punch it made me feel so happy. I mean I shouldn't have thought like that really, but I just, I just kept hitting her and the more I hit her and kicked her, the happier I felt. And yet at the end of it, I just felt more angrier [sic] because of the way I felt about it. (Debbie)

At the outset, Debbie experienced a sense of elation that she was "getting the upper hand." She is feeling powerful, but once the fight is over, these positive emotions dissipate and her anger increases.

When emotions are felt intensely, such as extreme anger and grief, they can feel unbearable:

I was thinking I want to get rid of this anger and I think what do I do so I just lay in the bed and I could feel it building up and my heart was killing me. (Alison)

Alison's anger combined with her grief at the loss of her child is deeply felt. The experience is centered in her heart, and she indicates that the experience is one of actual physical pain. Feeling several emotions at a single time is a tumultuous experience in itself. The effect is one of confusion, which is enhanced when the emotions are antagonistic:

I had a lot of mixed emotions after I'd done that. I felt happy that I'd stuck up to myself with her, but I also felt annoyed with myself because I'd hurt her and then I felt happy again because she got a taste of her own medicine and knew how I felt. It's dead weird. I'd so many emotions in one go that I'd never felt so many at the same time before. It was a really strange feeling. (Debbie)

In this extract, Debbie is describing how she felt after a fight with her sister. As with the previous episode, happiness accompanied anger, but there is a lot more going on besides: Debbie has conflicting feelings, which shift from annoyance to satisfaction, and it appears that some form of internal dissonance ("weird" and "strange") further complicates the emotional confusion.

Debbie's stories not only highlight a heightened arousal or "buzz" when engaged in a violent act, but they also illustrate the allure or "ecstasy of violence" (May, 1972). These alluring and fascinating elements of aggression are often forgotten, but rather than offer some ultimate explanation, as Debbie's experiences illustrate, they must be considered alongside the negative feelings of powerlessness. Julie's description of feeling guilty is a manifestation of such powerlessness; her inability to change the consequences of her actions leads to a need to "make up for it."

## Forms and Contexts of Aggression

Participants made use of a range of aggressive strategies. Forms of aggression ranged from direct physical and verbal aggression to more indirect and covert strategies. At some point, all of the women with the exception of one had behaved aggressively in more public domains, but this did not appear to be a frequent occurrence.

*Direct physical aggression.* Physical aggression ranged from slaps and pushes to punches, kicks, using implements such as bats, and throwing objects such as plates. The women gave varied reasons for their physical aggression: to protect others, losing control, revenge, and as a provocative act. We will focus here on protecting one's children and other family members such as siblings because for these women it often led to some form of aggression and, occasionally, physical violence:

And then, we got thrown out of the pub and the girl was stood arguing and trying to get hold of Valerie so we ended up absolutely beating her up because it's I don't know, when I knew something was happening to Valerie nothing happens to Valerie so because nothing happens to Valerie then the girl got it for hurting Valerie because there isn't, we didn't know any other way to take it on. (Julie)

Julie is describing when she and her sister intervened in an argument involving their sister Valerie and another woman. The argument escalated into a fight in which "people was getting punched, people was getting erm cut with glass, everything was going off." As described earlier, these women live in a major U.K. city with high levels of violent crime. Julie's experience, although perhaps not common, is a familiar occurrence. The significance of this context is intensified when we consider Julie's anger in



a different setting. Julie recounts a time when a schoolteacher upset her son by ripping up a drawing on which he had spent a long time:

She made him look stupid in front of all his friends, I wasn't having none of that. She wasn't going to make him look stupid so I was ready to kill her. And then that's when I see red. (Julie)

Julie conveys the rage she felt and what she was ready to do and claims that it was only because the head teacher intercepted her that nothing happened. This is in contrast to the fight to protect her sister, which took place in a context when an argument is more likely to escalate into something more serious.

We suggest that in the context of protection, the use of physical aggression does, to some extent, vindicate the perpetrator, particularly when mothers aggress because their children are under threat. For example, despite social sanctions against female aggression, Debbie explicitly states she would protect her children at any cost:

I'd do anything for my kids. I've even gone to as far as to say well, I would go as far as to say I'd do time in prison for my kids. If anybody did anything to my kids I would turn violent for them. (Debbie)

These extracts illuminate the crucial importance of context and its meaningful nature in understanding what does and does not encourage people to be aggressive.

*Direct verbal aggression.* Direct verbal aggression was the form most used by the participants, and they considered it a relatively ordinary and uneventful act. Shouting was not seen as particularly aggressive, more a normal way of interacting. Tanya recognized when her anger shifted from shouting to a more insidious form of verbal aggression:

I can get quite aggressive, I suppose I'm aggressive shouting. Me and my sister when we have a row we'll swear a lot and I would say that's very aggressive. Mum's like that all the time, she gets aggressively nasty. (Tanya)

In the women's accounts, there were many examples of swearing, raised voices, and the deliberate intent to hurt with words. For example, "if I'm arguing with somebody, then I do swear and out come the curses" (Debbie), and "I started saying some erm nasty nasty things like I wish he was dead and that" (Julie). Clearly, verbal aggression is expressed in a multitude of

ways, and the women's descriptions reflect the communicative and relational context of hostile aggressive acts. Unlike their descriptions of physical aggression, the women's accounts of their verbal aggression were quite mundane and undeveloped. Our sense was that minor forms of verbal aggression were par for the course in close relationships; it might not be the best way to behave, but it is an inevitable outcome of everyday life, at least within the life world of young women living in deprived areas of a U.K. city. It is possible that these women reflect a different range of experiences from middle-class women. This range of experiences again demonstrates the significance of context on anger formation and expression and the integral role played by social relationships within this process.

*Indirect aggression.* Julie described much covert and indirect aggressive behavior ranging from placing nails under her partner's car tires to putting itching powder in his underclothes. A favorite tactic of hers is putting small creatures into his food:

I can't fight Graham because I always end up losing because he's always stronger than me so I end up, doing stupid things like putting itching powder or if he wants something to eat I'll put something nasty in like a slug or something and then he'll eat it and I'll get my enjoyment by watching him doing . . . because I can't find, I don't find any other way so I think you know you've got that in your stomach now. (Julie)

Graham's greater strength prevents Julie from being physically aggressive, and there is a strong mix of frustration and resentment present. The word that springs to mind is *schadenfreuden*, or joy at the sufferings of others. Yet describing her actions as "stupid things" suggests something more complex is happening. This is a complicated cocktail of feelings of power/powerlessness as well as feelings of pleasure derived, at least in part, from knowing she has had vengeance:

It's my revenge back on them, that's how I get out of it now . . . I mean, I don't argue with people so much now, it's just like I find another way to get them back. If I can't do it one way, that's no good anymore, but I'm still in control because I'm doing it to them and they don't know nothing about it. That's why I think, yeah, I will get you. (Julie)

This extract illustrates power dynamics at work as well as the complexity of covert and indirect aggressive behavior. The goal is to inflict hurt and harm, leaving the victim unaware that she is the perpetrator. This gives Julie

a feeling of control over events, an experience that is probably absent when she is physically and verbally aggressive. Covert and indirect aggression is less impulsive and requires time and forethought if it is to be successful in achieving its goal of “doing nasty nasty things.” Such acts of indirect aggression are inevitably interrelational because they are designed specifically for one victim, in Julie’s case her partner. Similarly, Debbie’s indirect aggression involves giving her husband the “silent treatment”:

I just refused to speak to him which annoys him (laughs) so I just blanked him and then he’d say what’s up with you and I’d say nowt. And he knew there was because of the tone of my voice. (Debbie)

It is clear that the goal of Debbie’s silence is not to avoid or resolve the conflict. As with all acts of aggression, there is a clear communicative intent. This sort of silence is also a provocative act, which engenders unpleasant feelings for the recipient.

*Aggressive fantasies.* It is unsurprising that the women experience their anger and aggression as potent given that they are fueled by strong aggressive desires and/or fantasies. Invariably, these desires and fantasies involved killing another person, and the reasons given by the participants were varied. As might be expected, the complex ties and shifting power dynamics between family members is one source. For example, Cathy’s aggressive fantasies are directed toward her partner’s mother, who is a constant source of conflict. Cathy feels unable to confront his mother and so resorts to ruminating over what she would like to do:

I sit on a bench and stew in my miserable angry nastiest horrible way, thinking all the vilest things you could think of. I should be locked up with the thoughts I have. Murder, I think perhaps if I just run her over or set fire to her house in the middle of the night. If she would just die, I would be happy. (Cathy)

Tim’s mother lives in close proximity, and Cathy sees her as constantly interfering in their lives and undermining her authority as a mother. As a result, Cathy’s anger is channeled into murderous desires. Cathy feels impotent because, as we saw previously, her mechanism for managing anger is to remove herself from potentially anger-inducing situations. In this example, Cathy has redirected the anger she feels toward Tim’s mother by creating a fantasy world without repercussions. Although this anger and

fantasized aggression do not actually happen, it still represents an interpersonal act by Cathy against Tim's mother and therefore vicariously fulfils her need to aggress.

Similarly, Julie described a murderous rage:

She was driving and I was, she was in front and I was behind her and then I seen the red again. It's like this red glaze comes over me eyes again. I feel like I wanted to strangle her physically that's why I had, she was coming down a hill, and so I had to get out of the car. If I didn't have got [sic] out of the car, I knew I would have hurt her. (Julie)

The fact that Julie had to remove herself from the situation emphasizes the strength of her aggressive desire. What had driven Julie into such rage was her sister calling her stupid and telling her how she ought to live her life. Personal slights and insults usually provoke varying degrees of unpleasant feelings and negative responses. For Julie, the experience of being called "stupid" is particularly objectionable as well as painful because she recalls her mother calling her this throughout her childhood. Her sister triggered painful childhood memories of being called stupid, which hurt and anger Julie to this day. Julie's current mechanism for dealing with these feelings is to aggress against their source, in this case her sister, unless she takes control by removing herself when she hears the "alarm bells ringing":

When I hear people say it to me now, it's like alarm bells ringing in my head. (Julie)

In a similar manner, Alison's aggressive fantasies are prompted by feelings of deep-seated pain and anger. In her case, the anguish she feels over her daughter's death makes her fantasize about killing her husband:

Mel was in bed and I wanted to stab him. I had visions of getting a knife and stabbing him. I was like, god no, and I was lying there and I was thinking I want to get rid of this anger. (Alison)

Alison's sadness demands an opportunity for intimacy with her husband: She wants to share her grief. It is possible that her anger stems from this as well as from her loss. Feelings of impotence may also fuel the anger, giving rise to the desire to kill.

In what appears to be a more commonplace context, Debbie describes having an aggressive fantasy during an argument with her husband. Debbie had reprimanded their daughter, Carol, and sent her to her room. Carol had

gone for support to her father, who undermined Debbie's decision and an argument ensued:

So it just started from that really but like as the argument was going on, my heart was racing and like I had different pictures going through my head and it's like dead stupid because it's like I had visions of me just picking up the nearest knife and just stabbing at him. And the next minute I had visions of other things like flowers (laughs), it's stupid honestly. (Debbie)

At first glance, the triggers described by Debbie and Cathy seem to be of a different order to the ones described by Alison and Julie. For instance, Debbie's and Cathy's do not appear tinged with memories of past painful events or of recent loss; rather, it is "trivial." However, in spite of these apparent differences, there are similarities across the events. For example, both Julie and Debbie are angry for what they judge to be a personal offense against them, whereas Cathy feels her role as mother and partner to Tim is challenged by his mother. All four have been rendered powerless by these events but in very different ways. In the face of death, Alison is powerless to effect any real redress, and it is possible that her anger and fantasy about killing her husband is an attempt to overcome this futility. Julie's desire to strangle her sister is a response to powerlessness of a different and more long-lasting kind. Debbie's fantasy and accompanying anger is more transitory and of the moment, and Cathy's is a response to the vicissitudes of family life.

### **Anger as Moral Judgment**

The third theme, although remaining grounded in what the participants have said, is of a different order to the previous two themes. Its main focus is the women's sense making of their anger and aggression and as such involves a slightly higher level of interpretation. Perceptions of injustice and unfair treatment figured large in the participants' accounts of their anger. They described events from their childhood with the same sort of feeling they showed for more recent situations. Moreover, they felt anger when they perceived injustice toward others as well as themselves. Their perceptions give rise to intense emotions and at times extreme behavior, and our sense was that the writing up of them warranted a more theoretical stance.

Debbie talked at length of how, as a teenager, she felt extreme anger at her parents' differential treatment of her and her siblings:

And I think that's where a lot of my anger came from, started off from. A build up of being bullied at school and then things being different to the way they treated me compared to the way they treated my brother and sister. . . . They used to have had different images of the way they wanted me to be brought up and the way they wanted them to be brought up and I used to hate that, I used to really hate it. (Debbie)

Debbie was the youngest child and felt that her parents had changed the rules, allowing her less freedom than they had her brother and sister. She describes feeling "hate" at this unfairness, and her resentment is clear because she continues to feel strongly about this. It is interesting that the use of the word *hate* seems to have a rather elastic and diffuse meaning in everyday language and is used rather indiscriminately. Resentment can be more pernicious because of its enduring quality and the behavior it provokes: Debbie's response was to rebel against her parents and break the rules they had put in place. Whatever Debbie felt at the time, the feelings were strong enough for her to claim in the interview that, to some extent, her anger originated from them.

Even the most loving and affirmative of childhoods carry some unpleasant and even painful memories. These are made sense of by integrating them into our lives, by finding a role for them, and by using them to explain future action. Debbie was bullied throughout school, and her anger was accompanied by feelings of hurt:

I was hurting inside, the way people were treating me I just didn't like the fact that they always thought they were better than I was when deep down inside I knew they were the same. They had the same color blood as me and what have you, it was just the fact that their parents were more well off than mine. (Debbie)

The anger and hurt Debbie felt arises out of an evaluation of how things should be. Children are taught that it is wrong to bully others and that people deserve to be treated with respect. Debbie is making a moral judgment by drawing attention to the bullies having the "same color blood as me." The bullying and her perceptions of unfair treatment by her parents are woven into Debbie's meaning-making narratives of anger.

Julie is extremely angry with her parents, in particular her mother, because she felt unloved and neglected as a child. She describes a childhood in which she was responsible for her siblings much of the time, her mother "never said she loved us, any of us," and "it used to be all for the dad."

Feeling that one's parents did not fulfill their parental responsibilities violates deeply held expectations of the parent-child relationship. Julie asserts that the pain she felt as a child led directly to her delinquent behavior and an overriding desire to hurt her mother:

*Julie:* So it's easier to deal with now but I can see why I got into trouble and . . . oh everything happened to me. I was always stealing from people, I always wanted attention off other people or I used to make do stupid things like cut myself so I couldn't so somebody would take attention over me. You know now you look back over it because that all happened when I was around erm thirteen til around to when I was about twenty. For me things just got slowly worse, kept nicking cars, and I got into more bad people and then I started doing drugs and then one thing led to another and I started doing more things and more things and all the time I always I used to be close with them, me brothers and sisters, I always used to look after them. And because she stopped me seeing 'em, it made me like want to hurt her more by doing stupid things. But it never got me nowhere you see.

*Interviewer:* But did you think you were hurting her?

*Julie:* Yeah, I wanted to hurt her, yeah, I wanted to hurt her so much.

Julie is imposing order and meaning onto the turbulent and painful events from her childhood. The result is the claim of a causal link between her mother's care-taking and her delinquent behavior. She does this not only to make sense of her experiences but also, importantly, to be able to live with them.

As an adult, Julie is particularly sensitive to adult-child encounters that she perceives as unjust for the latter. This is a particular arena of conflict with her sister:

I see Valerie doing something wrong to Alice, I argue with her. I say you can't do that to your little girl, you don't do things like that but it's like nobody has any respect for anybody anymore. (Julie)

Julie sees her sister's behavior as a transgression of the rules, which should govern people's interactions with one another, and her frustration (e.g., "It's all wrong, that's why I get so frustrated") is a consequence of a personal evaluation of the significance of her sister's behavior.

Tanya's anger at her mother when she believes she has not kept her promises to the children is, in part, due to childhood memories of experiencing

the same thing. After taking her granddaughter Annie to an indoor climbing center, Tanya's mother promised to take her on a regular basis:

Never been again and that's what happened when I was young, and I'm not putting up with that anymore because that's unfair, you know, that's totally unfair and I'm not, I'm like you're not going to do this again because we don't need it. If you want to see them fine, but stop making promises you don't keep, which she's always doing, that's just an example. I just get totally pissed off with it, not again and you're not doing it to her. (Tanya)

There is a strong flavor of injustice to this account, of violating social norms of how to treat and behave children. Tanya's shift from "I" to "we" when she says "we don't need it" reflects how the feelings she had as a child are still present and are powerfully evoked when she sees Annie receiving similar treatment.

Not surprisingly, perceived injustice, rule violation, and personal offense in the context of one's intimate relationship provoked the most anger. Not long before the interviews, Julie had ended her relationship with Graham but then decided to give it a "second chance":

He'd erm while we'd been broke up he'd been seeing another girl and then he tried to get back with me. I'd slept with him and then I'd found out he was still seeing her. And then I was feeling dirty and all that, and I couldn't believe he'd gone and done it. He'd always used to say that we were always together and all this and that he'd never hurt the boys, but then I'd found erm the boys had seen her. Then this had really got my back up because I didn't want nothing like this to ever happen. (Julie)

This account is replete with conflicting emotions. Julie judges both Graham and herself unfavorably: Graham has betrayed her and she feels "dirty" because she is ashamed of her own actions. In addition, she is angry because he has involved the children in his disloyalty.

Being unfaithful is a serious transgression of relationship rules and inevitably causes grave damage to the bonds that hold the individuals concerned together. The time taken to heal and repair the relationship is typically lengthy. Seemingly more trivial offenses can also significantly undermine the strength of relationship ties even if more transitorily. For example, Debbie had had an argument with her husband, which she described as being about "nothing." Expecting Debbie to be out, Neil had brought a take away home, thereby breaking their agreement not to do this and put the money saved



toward a holiday. However, Debbie was in and when she suggested she buy herself a take away, he said “have something from the freezer.” Seemingly, they had argued because Neil had broken their agreement to save money for the family holidays. Yet on closer scrutiny, Debbie’s anger appeared integrally tied up with her judgment of what Neil’s behavior said about her self and their relationship:

One of the reasons that it hurt me was that he’d gone back on it and still gone out and bought it anyway. So if I had gone to my cousin’s with the kids I’d have known nothing about it but I caught him out and it hurt me because he’d gone back on it. But, the only explanation he could come up with was well you wasn’t going to be here, you weren’t supposed to be here and to me that’s just being deceitful, you know what I mean? (Debbie)

Money was an issue in that Neil had broken their agreement to cut back and save money for their holiday. However, this factor alone would probably not have led to an argument if Debbie had also broken it. The key features contributing to the conflict developing were Debbie’s perception of differential treatment and Neil’s deceit. Neil’s actions felt like a betrayal to Debbie as Graham’s did to Julie. Although not of the same order, both men had challenged Julie’s and Debbie’s expectations of how the world should be. As Debbie says:

It’s like, well why is it one rule for you when I am here and one rule for me when I’m not here or whatever, you know, it should be the same constantly and I just said fine do whatever you want to do, threw his dinner at him and I just come in here. (Debbie)

Neil (like Graham) had breached Debbie’s moral view of expected behavior between a husband and wife.

## Discussion

In this section, we build on some of the analytic observations already made by examining through the lens of aspects of phenomenological theory. We examine the role of the body in emotion experience and Solomon’s (1993) proposal that anger is a judgment involving evaluation. Throughout, we make a case for a greater use of qualitative studies, especially phenomenological ones, for the study of women’s anger and anger-related aggression. In particular, we note how this study has drawn attention to a range of

behaviors that are not commonly reported by middle-class women, which often comprise the samples of existing studies.

## **Anger and the Body**

There were many compelling descriptions of what anger feels like, and the body is central to this subjective experience. Although psychologists have always recognized a role for the body, they have focused on establishing the neurophysiological patterns and mechanisms that might underlie discrete emotions (see Strongman, 2003, for a review of relevant theories and research). From this perspective, the body is merely an aroused organism, and no attention is paid to “the experience of the person who is that body, who lives that body” (Stevick, 1971, p. 134). However, the body’s arousal is a key aspect of the experience of being angry; being angry is an experience that is lived through the body. Moran states that “the body discloses the world for us in a certain way” (Moran, 2000, p. 425), and this can be explained as a felt meaning, which “does not come to you in the form of thoughts or words or other separate units, but as a single (often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling” (Gendlin, 1962/1997, pp. 32-33) and is a prereflective engagement with the objects and events given to us in our world. The women’s descriptions aimed to make explicit somehow their lived embodied experience of being angry. Although inevitably these descriptions fail to capture entirely the experience, they signal a need to think seriously about how to incorporate felt meaning into psychological theories of emotion. The empirical problem is how to better grasp the ways in which the body reveals the world to us.

In addition, crying was an essential element of the anger experience. Crying is a hugely potent form of emotional expression, and it is surprising that adult crying has received little attention from psychologists (Vingerhoets & Cornelius, 2001; Vingerhoets, Cornelius, Van Heck, & Becht, 2000). A common theme throughout the extant literature is that, for women, crying is an expression of helplessness and powerlessness (Vingerhoets & Scheirs, 2000; Williams & Morris, 1996). Such feelings were evident in the women’s accounts: being unable to express anger, experiencing their anger as overwhelming, and feeling humiliated, all of which gave rise to a sense of powerlessness. The situations that give rise to anger and crying are interpersonal conflict situations, feelings of personal inadequacy and rejection, loss, and separation. These are all contexts evident in the women’s accounts.

Stevick’s (1971) proposal, derived from her empirical existential phenomenological analysis, is that anger arises when one experiences relational and transformative inability in a situation. This transformation is evident in

the women's accounts of their anger and is a response to ways of being they find untenable. Although the utility of notions of inability and transformation requires more empirical work, they resonate with the words of the women themselves. Qualitative work of a phenomenological persuasion has much to offer in determining the theoretical utility of such ideas.

The participants rarely experienced anger in any "pure" sense; invariably, it was accompanied by other emotions, such as guilt, fear, and even joy. However, there has been scant empirical work examining the relationship between anger and other emotions. The few extant studies are psychometric investigations, which focus on guilt (Ackerman, McMahan, & Fehr, 1984; Schill & Schneider, 1970). More recently, studies have attempted to distinguish between shame and guilt and their relationship with anger (Harder & Lewis, 1986; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). Without doubt, phenomenological investigations of how people experience and differentiate between these emotions, how they relate to anger, and in what contexts they come into play would be a useful adjunct to this literature.

## Emotions as Judgments

For the women, making sense of their anger revolved around perceptions of injustice to self and others, rule violation, and personal slights. From this perspective, an emotion is a type of judgment. Judgments do not cause an emotion; rather, an emotion is a judgment:

An emotion is a basic judgment about our Selves and our place in our world, the projection of the values and ideals, structures and mythologies, according to which we live and through which we experience our lives. . . . They are not reactions but interpretations. They are not responses to what happens but evaluations of what happens. And they are not responses to those evaluative judgments but rather they *are* those judgments. (Solomon, 1993, p. 126)

From this stance, emotions are about something. This characteristic is what phenomenologists have called "intentionality" (Solomon, 1993, p. 112): We fall in love *with* someone, we are afraid *of* something, we are angry *about* something. These objects (whether persons, events, objects, either real or imagined) are intentional because they are experienced as "in the world" (p. 117). There is no subject-object distinction; emotions are the means by which we connect with the objects of our world.

This logical connection emphasizes the relational core of emotions. Emotions bind us to other people, and when we are angry, we are angry *in* the context of the relationship. The close and intimate relationships we have

with our spouses and partners, children, and family, for example, are shot through with complex and dynamic power relations and are the ones likely to elicit the most intense anger. As the women's accounts testify, when we become angry in these relationships, our anger is rarely about a single instigating event; rather, it carries the weight of the past and intentions for the future. These concerns are often subtle and intangible, coming to the fore when we reflect and engage in conscious meaning making.

Solomon (1997) points out that not only are our emotions intentional and purposive, but sometimes, they are desperately so, leading to behavior that is unhelpful and destructive. This logic of desperation can be seen in the relationship between negative anger expression and aggressive behavior. For example, in a heated argument between intimates, both have the goal of changing the other's mind, of defining the world in one's own terms. Feeling that one is losing the argument can tip the individual into a course of action that, on reflection, is absurd and ultimately ineffective.

The women in this study became angry when they judged that they had suffered injustice, their rules had been violated, and their personal integrity threatened. Sometimes, the women expressed these judgments in a conscious and reflective manner, but in the main, they appeared to experience them as spontaneous and "natural." For Solomon (1997), these judgments are not "full-blooded intentional actions," but neither do they just "happen to us" (p. 297). Our judgments are culturally acquired (at least in part) and cognitively framed, but they are put into action by the person. As such, they are an inherent part of our lived experiences. A key feature of these judgments is how the past is brought to bear present anger.

For example, Julie referred several times to how she could not bear to be called "stupid." If this happened, she would feel intense anger, such as when she expressed the murderous desire to strangle her sister. Julie's rage was not simply a judgment about the instigating event but also bore traces of how Julie felt when her mother called her stupid when she was growing up. As Julie herself says, "When I hear people say it to me now it's like alarm bells ringing in my head." Thus, when emotions are conceived of as a form of judgment characterized by a relationship with self and other, they bring to the fore a temporal dimension not often recognized in psychological theorizing.

## **Women and Aggression**

This phenomenological study has provided convincing evidence of women's capacity to use a wide range of aggressive behavior, reflecting the findings from anthropologists and family violence researchers (Burbank,

1987, 1994; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Straus, Kantor, & Moore, 1997). In particular, it emphasizes how women are more likely to be aggressive in an intimate interpersonal context (Averill, 1983). Approximately 80% of violent interactions between intimate partners are preceded by arguments (Greenfield et al., 1998), which suggests that more work is needed that examines communication patterns, provocations, motivations, and how the nature of the relationship shapes the expectations, cognitions, and behaviors before, during, and after the angry (and aggressive) interaction. Phenomenological analysis is ideally suited for teasing out both the proximate and distal factors that contribute to angry and aggressive interactions—from the perspective of those involved. In particular, this study draws attention to how past events in one's life have a bearing on how the individual negotiates and manages conflictual events.

Everyday observation suggests that for most adults in a conflict situation, verbal aggression is more likely than physical aggression. Indeed, the participants in Averill's (1983) study of anger and aggression reported physical aggression in only 10% of anger episodes compared to 49% for verbal aggression. Importantly, studies that examine violent couples find that verbal aggression is often a precursor to physical violence (Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 2000).

The women in this study described many different types of verbal aggression, and choice appeared heavily context dependent. For example, the most hurtful expressions were reserved for intimate partners. As the analysis noted, this form of aggression was seen as mundane and part of everyday life. It is this very feature that makes it an important area of investigation for aggression researchers, and it is qualitative methods that are best able to document the various forms of verbal aggression and the contexts that influence its expression.

The study of indirect aggression in adults is in its infancy, with few studies to date (Green, Richardson, & Lago, 1996; Kaukiainen et al., 2001; Walker et al., 2000). Most of the women made use of at least one indirect aggression strategy, ranging from "silent treatment" or cutting up clothes to more covert acts such as adding small creatures to meals. Without exception, these were directed at the women's husbands/partners. We would speculate that similar to physical and verbal aggression, this form of covert aggression can take many forms and that the context is crucial in determining response. For example, it is unlikely that individuals would use these forms of indirect aggression in a workplace environment, such as a university. In this context, Björkqvist et al. (1994b) found that indirect aggression was expressed as

rational-appearing aggression and/or social manipulation. In contrast, the intimate world of close relationships is characterized by intense feelings and emotions, which can bring out both the best and worst in people.

Given that the women's accounts are replete with the diversity of aggressive behavior, it is perhaps not surprising that they describe having powerful aggressive fantasies and/or desires. The interview schedule contained no questions about aggressive fantasies, and the emergence of these "hot" cognitions is a direct consequence of the inductive analytic nature of IPA. The extant literature sheds little light on this aspect of cognition in normal populations and how aggressive fantasies are experienced within the individual life world (Crabb, 2000; Kenrick & Sheets, 1993; Russell & Baenninger, 1996). It is precisely such imaginings that make us human, and qualitative studies, especially those of a phenomenological persuasion, are well placed for examining this underinvestigated topic.

To conclude, this article has reported a qualitative analysis of women's anger and aggression from a phenomenological perspective. We have suggested that this sort of analysis can illuminate previously somewhat neglected aspects of anger and aggression: the importance of the body and crying in the subjective experience of anger, the complex meaning making that lies behind the anger experience, and the heterogeneity of women's aggressive behavior.

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**Virginia Eatough**, PhD, is a lecturer in the School of Psychology, Birkbeck University of London. She works from a phenomenological psychology perspective, and her research interests revolve around emotion and emotional experience. This includes anger-related aggression. Her current research looks at adult crying.

**Jonathan A. Smith** is a professor of psychology at Birkbeck University of London. He has developed interpretative phenomenological analysis and applied it in a range of research projects in social and health psychology. Much of his current research focuses on family and health.

**Rachel Shaw**, PhD, is a Chartered Health Psychologist at the School of Life and Health Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, U.K. She is interested in phenomenological and narrative approaches to understanding human experience and works mainly in health and social psychology. Her current research interests revolve around issues of (non)motherhood, pregnancy, and the media.