A Note on Anger and Aggression in Old Age

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Social scientists seem to have given remarkably little attention to the relationship between aging and the emotional states of aggression, anger, and hostility. For example, a recent book devoted entirely to a comprehensive review of the psychology of aggression (Buss, 1961) contains no references to the relationships between aging and aggression.

A similar absence of reports and data was noted in a check of the last six issues of the Annual Review of Psychology and of other bibliographic sources. The Handbook of Aging and the Individual (Birren, 1959) also contains no specific references to this area in the index, but there is an item under crime which reports that the incidence of criminal violence declines with age. A brief comment in Busse's chapter in The Handbook also relates to the problem. It refers to increased irritability in aged patients and to evidence that depression in elderly individuals generally is not related to hostile and aggressive impulses. Two additional studies were uncovered (Cason, 1930; Dean, 1962), but these indicate that aging is accompanied by decreased, rather than increased, irritability or annoyability. The extent of anger in aged subjects is also shown by Dean to have a relationship to degree of boredom and to whether or not the subject was employed. Still another aspect of the subject is gleaned from the report by Tomkins and Miner (1957) that the elderly subjects of the national standardization sample for the Tomkins-Horn Picture Arrangement Test displayed a clearcut tendency to "delay" aggressive responses. In all, however, the research literature on aging and aggression seems to be sparse and far from conclusive as to what the usual patterns of reaction might be.

Hypothesis

Our hypothesis was formulated as a by-product of a study in a different area in which a group of 55 psychiatrically normal adults, ranging in age from 40 to 75, were asked the following two questions: (1) Is it ever right to be angry? (2) When is the last time you were angry? Of the 27 Ss below age 60, 89% gave an unqualified "yes" response to the first question, whereas only 35% of the 28 Ss age 60 and over said "yes." The difference between the age groups was very significant statistically ($X^2 = 14.29; P<.01$ level of confidence). Responses to the second question on the other hand, were more uniform for the two age groups; 81% of those below age 60 and 70% of the subjects above age 60 admitted they had been angry within the previous two weeks. The hypothesis was thus suggested that aged individuals regard anger as undesirable but perceive themselves as experiencing anger.

Subjects and Procedure

Our study was planned as a replication and extension of the pilot study from which the hypothesis was derived. The question, "Is it ever right to be angry?" and the Clyde Mood Scale (1960) were administered as part of a large psychometric test battery to a group of 140 adults who had been selected as psychiatrically normal controls for a study of subjects with psychotic depression. The Clyde Mood Scale consists of adjectives and phrases which the S sorts into four self descriptive categories, which provide an indication of the nature of his affective state. Only the following five items dealing with anger and aggression were analyzed for the present report: rebellious, furious, nagging, rude, and violent.

Ss were divided into two age groups of 46 to 65 years and 66 to 85 years. Table 1 summarizes the background variables.

We made a considerable effort to achieve a
close equating of the two groups in order to control the possible effects of social background on the test responses. The sample was chosen, therefore, for social heterogeneity and was recruited from several sources. Approximately 40% of the Ss were obtained from a State Em-atrically normal controls for a study of Ss ployment Service and were paid for their services. These unemployed and retired individuals were balanced by a number of employed Ss from the community, who were recruited through social clubs. The remainder of the Ss were obtained from one floor of a large apartment house (95% of the women on this floor participated), three Golden Age Clubs, and a women’s community welfare organization. It should be noted that the educational level of the older sample approximates the national median of 8.2 years for persons over 65 years of age (U.S. Census, 1950). Also to be noted is the fact that we failed to equate our two age groups on nativity; about half of the older group but only a fifth of the younger group were foreign-born. This will have to be borne in mind when the results are evaluated.

RESULTS

Table 2 summarizes the responses of the two age groups. The impressions from the pilot study and the resultant hypothesis were generally sustained. There was a significantly greater frequency on the part of the over 65-year-old group to deny that it is ever right to be angry, than in the below 65-year-old group. Yet the older group described themselves significantly more often as furious than did the younger subjects, which suggests that they see themselves as angry even though they apparently believe that it is not right to be angry. The general social conformity of all the Ss is suggested by their rejection of the idea that they are violent, rude, and nagging. The younger Ss however, do regard themselves more frequently as rebellious than the older group, which points perhaps to a difference between the vitality and assertiveness of younger persons and the resignation or conservatism of the elderly.

No sex differences in either age group were found, but the sex-by-age interaction revealed a significant difference for the men, who showed the differences in attitudes toward being angry in respect to age more definitely than the women. Women of both age groups generally disapproved of anger. It would thus seem that men change more extensively than women in old age, in the direction of the disapproval of anger, and become, essentially, more like the women in their attitude.

DISCUSSION

The results support the hypothesis that elderly Ss, in contrast to younger individuals, regard it as wrong to be angry, but nevertheless admit as frequently or more frequently than younger Ss to experiencing this emotion. The denial of rebelliousness on the part of the elderly seems to be consistent with the finding of a greater “delay” on their part in giving the aggressive response to the Tomkins-Horn P.A.T. This follows from the fact that the P.A.T. delay of aggression score is based on aggressive responses to authority, which are derived from pictures in which a workman reacts to being criticized by a superior.

Accordingly, our results suggest that with advanced age attitudes toward anger and aggression move in the direction of submission to authority and conformity to the social status quo.

Such an authoritarian orientation of the elderly, moreover, seems to be consistent with the reported low positive correlations with age.
on the California F Scale on authoritarian attitudes (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and with other studies which describe older adults as more conservative in attitude than younger people and as having more absolute standards of right and wrong conduct (Kuhlen, 1959).

A possible basis for the younger group's attitude of greater permissiveness toward freedom of expression of anger and self assertiveness than the old may be the general cultural trend toward a more equalitarian society, particularly within the United States, that has been developing during the past few generations. The fact that our older-aged sample included a much higher percentage of European-born and reared Ss than the younger group lends some support to this cultural factor as at least a contributory element toward the results obtained in the study. A good example of this cultural change is the movement toward increased assertiveness of employees toward their employers which has occurred during the past three or four decades in our society. This may, accordingly, be reflected in the less frequent delay by young than old adult subjects in making the aggressive response to the foreman in the Tomkins-Horn P.A.T.

An additional important area in which equalitarianism has affected attitudes toward expressions of anger and aggression is in child-rearing practices. Our young adult sample may be showing in their responses their rebellion against the non-permissive attitudes toward display of anger of their parents. As parents themselves, they may be more permissive with respect to their own children. It is thus quite possible that when our young adult Ss move beyond 65 years of age they will not respond like our current old sample, but will maintain their present permissiveness and respond in the affirmative as often as young adults to, "Is it ever right to be angry?"

We do not, of course, maintain that our findings are explicable purely on the basis of cultural and general psychological factors. Changes in attitude toward assertion and aggression can certainly be brought on by biological changes. The aging process per se, which brings with it decreased vitality and flexibility of functioning, undoubtedly has a significant bearing on the tendencies of the aged toward conservatism, lack of assertiveness to authority, and to disapproval of anger.

**Summary**

The hypothesis that the aged tend to regard anger as undesirable but yet perceive themselves as free to show such feelings was tested by administering the question, "Is it ever right to be angry?" and the Clyde Mood Scale to a socially heterogeneous sample of 140 subjects, divided into a 46-to-65-year (young) group and 61-to-86-year (old) group.

The results generally confirmed the hypothesis. The frequency of "yes" responses to the question, Is it ever right to be angry? was significantly greater in the young than in the old group. No sex differences were found in either age group, but men generally were found to change more extensively with age than women from a permissive to a non-permissive attitude toward anger. Self-descriptions, derived from the Clyde Mood Test, showed that the young group more often thought of themselves as rebellious, but the old group more often thought of themselves as furious. No significant differences were noted between the groups on nagging, rude, and violent.

Both cultural change and the effects of the aging process on the individual's self-identification and perception of his role as child and parent are considered as possible explanations of the findings.

**References**


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