

# The Social Costs and Benefits of Anger as a Function of Gender and Relationship Context

Agneta H. Fischer · Catharine Evers

Published online: 16 April 2011  
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**Abstract** On the basis of Social Role Theory and a social functional view of emotions, we argue that gender differences in anger experiences and expression are related to men's and women's relationship context. We hypothesized that women in traditional relationship contexts would express their anger less directly, and would suppress their anger more, due to expected negative social appraisals. We compared anger reactions to a conflict situation in a traditional and egalitarian relationship context. Eighty-two Dutch adult participants (43 women and 39 men) were recruited partly by students in a psychology class, and partly by a snowball method. They were invited to participate only if they had a steady relationship of minimally one year. The results show that women report more intense subjective anger in both contexts, but that the expression of anger differed with relationship context. In traditional relationships women tend to suppress their anger more than men, while men report to express their anger directly more than women. This difference in anger expression was mediated by negative social appraisals. In egalitarian relationships, this difference was not found.

**Keywords** Gender · Anger · Social appraisal · Relationship context

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A. H. Fischer (✉)  
Department of Psychology, University of Amsterdam,  
Roeterstraat 15, 1018 WB,  
Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
e-mail: a.h.fischer@uva.nl

C. Evers  
Utrecht University,  
Utrecht, the Netherlands

## Introduction

The stereotype that men are the more aggressive gender is prevalent in the US and many Western-European societies, and is often generalized to the emotion of anger (see e.g., Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux 1999; Plant et al. 2000; Parnley and Cunningham 2008; Shields 1991). Thus, men are stereotypically perceived to express their anger more directly and in a more antagonistic way than do women (e.g., Brody 1993; Brody and Hall 2008; Fischer 1993; Shields 2002). However, there is evidence from various studies on gender differences in anger that indicate that this stereotypical view is not always supported. Below we will review research that indicates that some studies report more direct and overt anger expressions by men than women, other studies report no differences, and some studies even report a reversed pattern, indicating that women experience or express more anger than men. These inconsistencies seem to be largely due to the social context in which gender differences in anger reactions have been studied (see also Deaux and Major 1987). There is little research, however, examining how these contextual factors influence gender differences in anger. The research that we review mostly includes English speaking participants from the US, the UK and Canada. We will explicitly mention when participants are from other countries.

Based on Social Role Theory (Eagly 1987, 1997; Eagly and Wood 1999) and on a social functional view of anger (e.g., Fischer and Manstead 2008; Keltner and Haidt 1999), the goal of the present paper is to show that gender differences in anger expression are a function of the relationship context in which anger arises. Women and men have different social roles, related to the relational context in which they live, and we examine the idea that their anger expression and regulation varies with this

context. We tested this assumption in a questionnaire study, in which Dutch men and women in both egalitarian and traditional relationships were asked to report their reactions to a conflict situation.

### Gender Differences in Anger

Anger is elicited when individuals are confronted with an obstacle to their goals (e.g., Averill 1983; Frijda 1986). Generally, anger implies that we blame another person, and that the behavior of the other person is not considered incidental, but intentional (e.g., Roseman et al. 1994). Many studies, all based on participants from the US, the UK or Canada, have shown an absence of gender differences in the subjective experience of anger (for overviews see Archer 2004; Campbell 2006; Kring 2000). For example, in a meta-analysis on everyday occurrences of aggression that included subjective anger measures, no significant gender differences in subjective anger were found (Archer 2004). Studies comparing men and women on trait anger (Deffenbacher et al. 1996; Kopper 1991; Kopper and Epperson 1991, 1996) also did not find any gender difference in the likelihood to experience anger across a variety of situations. Moreover, most studies, whether diary studies and daily logs (Barrett et al. 1998; Oatley 1998), autobiographical studies (Baumeister et al. 1990; Fischer and Roseman 2007, based on a Dutch sample) or other types of studies in which self-reported *intensity* of anger was measured, did not reveal any gender difference (Allen and Haccoun 1976; Averill 1983; Harris 1994; Kring and Gordon 1998; Wagner et al. 1993). Cross-cultural data from 37 different countries in five different continents on the experience and expression of different emotions, including anger, also revealed no gender differences in subjective anger. In this study, men and women in both individualistic and collectivistic countries and in countries with a more egalitarian versus or a more traditional gender role division were compared, but no interaction with gender on the measure of subjective anger was found (Fischer et al. 2004).

If differences are found, as is the case in some studies, using American and Dutch respondents, some of these even contradict the stereotype, women reporting more rather than less anger than do men (Brody et al. 1995; El-Sheikh et al. 2000; Fischer et al. 2004; Strachan and Dutton 1992). Interestingly, the more intense anger on the part of women seems to be most prevalent in reaction to men compared to women (Brody et al. 1995; Harris 1994; Richardson et al. 1986), and in intimate settings following condescending behavior by men (Buss 1989; El-Sheikh et al. 2000; Frodi 1977; Harris 1991). In other words, women's anger is most often elicited in heterosexual, romantic relationship contexts.

Studies examining the *expression* of anger also do not consistently support the stereotype of anger as a typically

male emotion. Some studies using self-reports of US participants on the frequency of anger expressions did not show any gender differences (e.g., Allen and Haccoun 1976; Balswick and Avertt 1977; Campbell and Muncer 1987; King and Emmons 1990; Kopper and Epperson 1991; Spielberger et al. 1985; Zoccali et al. 2007), whereas a few other studies found that women were more expressive of anger (Davidson 1981; Dosser et al. 1983). One reason why different studies have produced different results, may be that different contexts have been included. One contextual variable that seems responsible for gender differences in anger expression is the target of the anger expression. Male friends were often reported to be the most frequent target of anger. In addition, Timmers et al. (1998) found that male friends were more often the target of Dutch women's anger than the reverse.

Another factor that may have contributed to inconsistencies in the findings related to gender differences in anger is that anger can be expressed in various ways. Many different anger expression styles have been distinguished (e.g., Funkenstein et al. 1954; Jacobs et al. 1989; Mace 1982; Spielberger et al. 1985; Wolf and Foshee 2003). For the present purpose, we distinguish between what has been termed 'direct' expressions versus more 'indirect' expressions of anger. Direct (sometimes also referred to as 'overt') expressions are defined by their antagonistic nature, and imply an attack or negative confrontation with the target of one's anger. For this reason, it is often assumed that social power is required to express anger in this way (Keltner et al. 2003; Van Kleef and Coté 2007). These expressions often take the form of physical or verbal aggression, although it should be noted that in the majority of studies on aggression no measures of anger have been included, and thus conclusions regarding anger on the basis of this research should be interpreted with caution. Early, but also more recent meta-analyses and reviews on aggression, including predominantly US participants, have concluded that men engage more in physical aggression, and slightly more in verbal aggression (Archer 2000, 2002, 2004; Bettencourt and Miller 1996; Eagly and Steffen 1986; Frodi et al. 1977; Hyde 1984), whether the studies were based on self-reports, peer reports, or teacher's reports.

There are also various forms of indirect expressions of anger. Indirect expressions of anger are defined by the fact that one tries to influence the anger target in a more subtle or indirect way. Examples of indirect anger expressions are gossiping, ignoring, leaving the scene, or stonewalling. Such forms of anger expression may be more prevalent among women (e.g., Evers et al. 2005). Gender differences in this form of anger expression can be inferred from research on relational aggression that indicates that women show more relational aggression than do men (Archer 2004; Hess and Hagen 2006), but again this line of research

usually does not examine the role of anger. The more frequent occurrence of indirect anger expression is already present in girls, who socially exclude the target of their anger more frequently than boys (Archer and Coyne 2005; Xie et al. 2002, but see Peets and Kikas 2006 for an opposite finding). Manipulating friendships, for example by social exclusion, seems an excellent tool to force others to apologize, or change their behavior, without direct confrontation (see also Campbell and Muncer 2008).

Another example of an indirect anger expression is crying. The assumption is that tears may persuade others to change their behavior in line with the goals of the angry, crying person. Whether it is a deliberate strategy or an actual reflection of powerlessness, crying is reported as an ingredient of women's anger reaction that is notably absent in men's anger expressions (Eagly and Steffen 1986; Frost and Averill 1982; Lombardo et al. 1983; Timmers et al. 1998).

Taken together, these findings show first of all that gender differences in the subjective experience of anger are mostly absent; if a difference is found, women have reported more intense anger than men, especially in reaction to their male partners. Second, gender differences in anger expressions—based on a large variety of studies using different conceptualizations and methodologies—show inconsistent patterns, but seem to support the idea that men express their anger more directly and women more indirectly. However, the occurrence of these gender differences seems to be dependent on the type of context in which the anger occurs (see also Fischer and Evers 2010). The question then is which contextual factors mediate this gender difference and how this relates to the subjective experience of anger.

#### A Social Role Account of the Relation Between Gender and Anger

According to Social Role Theory (Eagly 1987, 1997; Eagly and Wood 1999) gender differences in social behavior arise from differential distribution of social roles among men and women. In Western society men are more likely to assume the role of primary family provider, whereas women occupy the domestic role of homemaker and primary caretaker of children (Eagly 1987; Eagly and Wood 1999; Wood and Eagly 2002). Different social roles require different social behaviors, skills, and psychological capacities. As far as men are more likely to assume the role of family provider, and women that of homemaker and caretaker of children, they are more likely to develop gender-specific dispositions and behaviors that fit these roles. Emotions can be regarded as an intrinsic part of the enactment of a social role, because they serve important social functions (e.g., Fischer and Manstead 2008; Keltner and Haidt 1999). For example, employees of

children's day care centers who are very friendly and never show any anger will be seen as good employees, whereas security employees who never show anger may be regarded as less suitable for their job. The same reasoning may be applied to the division of social roles between men and women.

The goal of expressing anger is to force a change in the target's behavior (see also Roseman et al. 1994). Such emotion goals have been referred to as 'emotivational goals'; the goal that is specific for anger is *coercion* (Fischer and Roseman 2007). This goal is similar to the instrumental beliefs proposed by Campbell (1993; Campbell and Muncer 1987, 2008), although these only apply to physical aggression (e.g., 'I believe that physical aggression is necessary to get through to someone'). Because this coercion goal is intrinsic to anger, we expect that men and women would report equally strong coercion goals whenever they experience anger. We expect, however, that gender differences especially occur in the ways in which the goal can be reached. This should become particularly apparent in how men and women express and regulate their anger in contexts where they have different social roles.

Whereas women tend to express their anger more indirectly than men in public settings or with relative strangers, a contrasting pattern occurs for gender differences in aggression between romantic partners (Archer 2000). This research shows that women and not men engage slightly more often in physical aggression against their partners, although they are not more likely to inflict an actual injury on their partner. Other studies on marital conflicts also seem to suggest that women are the more demanding and critical gender, whereas men tend to avoid conflicts and withdraw from such interactions. This has been referred to as the wife demand/husband withdrawal pattern (e.g., Christensen and Heavey 1993). Although these studies have not directly examined anger expressions, we may infer that it shows a pattern of gender differences that at least modifies the idea that men always express their anger in a more direct way than do women.

Given a romantic relationship context, we may further assume that different types of relationship may also affect how men and women try to meet emotivational goals when they are angry. The way in which individuals try to use their anger most effectively, may depend on their expectations about the partner's role and behavior. This means that men and women may have different ways in expressing and regulating their anger depending on the relationship context. Women in traditional role contexts are expected to be focused on the harmony in the relationship, and their homemaker's role is associated with less power compared to women in egalitarian relations who are (also) engaged in the provider's role. The direct expression of anger thus seems less optimal for women engaged in a traditional

gender role. We therefore expect that women in traditional role contexts suppress their anger or express it in rather indirect ways, because they fear negative evaluation, or even retaliation by their partners.

We have referred to such expectations as *negative social appraisals* (Evers et al. 2005; Manstead and Fischer 2001). They have been shown to affect men's and women's anger expressions to a different degree. In one experiment for example (Evers et al. 2005), we found that women acted less aggressively towards the target of their anger, when they expected to meet this person, than when the anger target remained anonymous. Expecting to meet the other person elicited anxiety in women about the possible consequences of their anger expression. For men, this did not make a difference. In other words, women may expect greater social costs of their anger expressions than men. Because anger is considered to imply the readiness to attack another person (see also Bettencourt and Miller 1996; Campbell 1993, 2006; Eagly and Steffen 1986; Fehr et al. 1999; Richardson and Green 1999), negative social appraisals would result in an indirect expression or a suppression of their anger. This would be less the case for women in egalitarian relationships, where power is more balanced. There is no reason therefore why anger would elicit more negative social appraisals in such relationships.

### The Present Study

We examined the way in which men and women in a traditional and egalitarian relationship context would experience and express their anger. In Dutch society anger is evaluated in a similar way as in other Western-European countries and the US: Anger is seen as a useful emotion, as long as it is expressed in a non-aggressive way. Women, however, are believed to display their anger in a less direct way than are men (Timmers et al. 2003). We defined traditional and egalitarian relationship context on the basis of the number of hours of paid work of each of the partners: if the number of hours was more or less equal, the participant was considered to have an egalitarian relationship, and if the man had significantly more hours of paid work than the woman, the participant was considered to have a traditional relationship. We also examined related characteristics of these different relationship contexts, namely relational power, in order to check whether more traditional couples indeed had a more asymmetrical power balance.

We used autobiographical conflicts as the antecedents for anger, because anger has been found to be a very powerful emotion in relational conflicts (e.g., Gottman 1994). We asked participants to recall situations in which they had had a conflict with their current partner. We asked them to report on two *different* types of conflicts (one about a

financial and one about a relational issue), in order to test the generalizability of our results beyond one type of conflict. The specific nature of the conflict is therefore not of primary relevance in the present research.

We first explored whether there would be any difference in the characteristics of the conflicts that could form an alternative explanation, such as the immediate reason for the conflict, how long ago the conflict took place, how frequently they had had such conflicts, who had initiated the conflict and who contributed most on solving it. Based on studies of marital conflicts, we expected that women would initiate the conflict more often in both relationship contexts, but we did not expect differences with respect to who solved the problem. We tested the following hypotheses related to anger, anger expression and anger regulation.

First, we predicted that women would report more intense subjective anger than men, but we expected no interaction with relationship context.

Second, we predicted an interaction between relationship context and gender for anger expressions, such that women in traditional relations would report less direct anger expressions, more indirect anger expression, and more suppression of their anger than men in traditional relationships, whereas we did not expect any of these gender differences in egalitarian relationships.

Third, we also predicted an interaction for negative social appraisals, such that women in traditional relationships would foresee more negative social appraisals than men, whereas this difference would not occur in egalitarian relations.

Fourth, we expected these negative social appraisals to mediate gender differences in direct anger expressions in traditional relationship contexts, such that more negative social appraisals would mediate their less direct anger expressions.

## Method

### Participants

Eighty-two participants (43 women, 39 men) completed a questionnaire. All 82 participants had a steady relationship for at least 2 years ( $M=2.95$ ,  $SD=.88$ ). Half of the sample ( $N=41$ , 19 men, 22 women) had children, whereas the other half ( $N=41$ , 20 men, 21 women) did not; 27 participants were married, though 61 lived together with their partners. Average age range in the sample was between 29 and 32 years ( $M=2.66$ ;  $SD=1.25$ ).

### Design

The study had a 2 (gender) x 2 (relationship context: traditional versus egalitarian) x 2 (type of conflict: relational or financial) design, with the latter factor being a

within-subjects factor. In line with the definitions of Social Role Theory, we included respondents in one of the two relationship context conditions based on their answers on two questions concerning the division of labor (“How many hours of paid work do you have?” and “How many hours of paid work does your partner have?”). On average, the participants in this study had 24 hours paid work, with the women reporting 16 hours of paid work and the men 32 hours of paid work. The relationship context was considered traditional, if the man worked more hours than his partner, and it was considered egalitarian if the woman had equal (or more) hours of paid work compared to her partner. We included men who worked more hours than their partner in the traditional relationship context; and women who worked more or equal hours than their partner to the egalitarian relationship condition. This resulted in 23 women and 17 men in the traditional condition, and 20 women and 22 men in the egalitarian condition.

### Procedure

Part of the sample was recruited by students from psychology classes at the department of psychology at the University of Amsterdam, who asked their parents to participate in this study. In addition to their own parents, the students also asked parents of their friends, acquaintances of their parents, or their own friends. The main requirement was that the participants had a steady relationship for more than 1 year. It was made sure that the purpose of the study was not communicated to potential participants. The participants were approached with a standard text, telling them that this study was about dealing with conflicts in relationships. One person of the couple was selected to fill in the questionnaire, in order to avoid interdependency of the data. The choice whether this was the man or the woman was made by us, and not left to the couple, in order to avoid the creation of a biased sample of individuals who had selected themselves as participant. The participants filled in the questionnaire at home and returned it anonymously to the researchers (in a closed envelope).

### Questionnaire

Participants were asked to recall two different types of conflict with their current partner, one about their relationship, and one about financial issues. The sequence of the two types of conflicts was randomized. The exact phrasing of the questions can be found in [Appendix A](#).

### *Characteristics of the Conflict*

After having described the conflict in a few sentences, several questions were asked in order to control for the fact that men

and women in different relationship contexts would describe very different types of conflicts, making a comparison between the groups problematic. First, participants could indicate whether any of the following causes applied to the conflict they had described (1=not at all; 7=very much): the partner did not meet an agreement, the partner showed inappropriate behavior, the partner insulted the participant, the partner showed no respect, or the partner ignored the participant). We further asked how long ago this conflict had taken place (1 item), how many of such conflicts they had had (1 item), who initiated the conflict (1=*I initiated the conflict*, 7=*my partner initiated the conflict*), and who contributed most to solving the conflict (1=*I did*, 7=*my partner did*). Then the participants answered several questions about their emotional reaction:

### *Subjective Anger*

How intense was your anger (1 item; we also asked for several other emotions, which we will not report here).

### *Type of Anger Expression*

*Direct anger*: criticizing the partner, scolding the partner, saying that you are angry, verbally attacking the other,  $\alpha=.78$ ; *indirect anger*: sharing the anger with others (gossiping), crying, not knowing what to do,  $\alpha=.73$ ), and *anger suppression* (suppressing, redirecting the anger towards someone else, and not showing anything,  $\alpha=.72$ ).

### *Coercion Goal*

I wanted my partner to take me serious, I wanted my partner to change his or her behavior, I experienced control over my partner, I wanted to influence my partner, I felt strong with respect to my partner,  $\alpha=.72$ ).

### *Negative Social Appraisals*

I was afraid that the situation got worse, I was afraid of revenge, I expected negative effects for our relationship, I could not stand against my partner, I worried that my partner would like me less,  $\alpha=.81$ ).

At the end of the questionnaire we also asked five questions concerning the *relational power* between the participant and their partner, in order to check whether the actual distinction between traditional and egalitarian roles (in terms of hours of paid work) would be reflected in differential power experiences: I am the one who takes the decisions, I am the most dominant in the relationship, we mostly do what my partner wants (rev.), I decide what to do with respect to finances, I decide what to do with respect to the activities we undertake ( $\alpha=.84$ ).

We also asked for several demographical variables, such as age (1=18–25 years, 2=26–32 years, 3=33–40 years, 4=41–50 years, and 5=older than 51), marital status (married or not married), whether they had any children (yes or no), and duration of the relationship (1=3–12 months, 2=1–3 years, 3=3–10 years, 4=10 years or longer) in order to control for potential confounding variables.

## Results

Because we assumed that type of relationship could also be related to age, being married, educational level, length of relationship, and having children, we first examined whether there were differences between men and women and relationship context. The means for the different groups (men and women in traditional and egalitarian relationships) are shown in Table 1. They show that the participants in the traditional role contexts had more children, were more often married, were older, and had a longer relationship, but there were no differences between men and women within relationship contexts.

### Relational Power

In order to check whether the division of respondents into traditional and egalitarian relationships was related to the experience of power, which would support our decision, we conducted an ANOVA with gender and relationship context as factors and relational power as dependent measure. There was a significant effect of gender of respondent,  $F(1,78)=12.99$ ,  $p<.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.14$ , which was qualified by an interaction between gender and relationship context,  $F(1,78)=10.32$ ,  $p<.01$ , partial  $\eta^2=.12$ . As predicted, women in traditional relationships ( $M=3.17$ ;  $SD=.95$ ) experienced less relational power than did men ( $M=4.48$ ;  $SD=.82$ ), whereas no such difference was found in egalitarian relationships ( $M_{men}=4.02$ ;  $SD=.42$ ;  $M_{women}=4.03$ ;  $SD=.75$ ).

**Table 1** Characteristics of the sample

	Traditional		Egalitarian		Total
	Men (18)	Women (25)	Men (21)	Women (18)	
Number and percentage of participants with children	12 (66%) <sup>a</sup>	17(68%) <sup>a</sup>	7 (33%) <sup>b</sup>	5 (28%) <sup>b</sup>	41
Number and percentage of participants who are married	11(61%) <sup>a</sup>	8(32%) <sup>a</sup>	4 (19%) <sup>b</sup>	4(22%) <sup>b</sup>	27
Age (range in 5 categories*)	3.38 (1.09) <sup>a</sup>	3.08 (1.38) <sup>a</sup>	2.30 (.80) <sup>b</sup>	1.70 (.96) <sup>c</sup>	
Duration of relation**	3.33 (.69) <sup>a</sup>	3.36 (.76) <sup>a</sup>	2.66 (.80) <sup>b</sup>	2.33 (.91) <sup>b</sup>	

\*We differentiated 5 different age categories: 1=18–25, 2=26–32, 3=33–40, 4=41–50, 5=older than 51

\*\* The duration of the relationship was also divided into 4 categories (1=3–12 months, 2=1–3 years, 3=3–10 years, 4=10 years or longer)

We conducted X-square tests to compare the number of participants with children and the number of married individuals, both within the traditional and egalitarian groups ( $ps>.05$ ), and between the gender role groups  $\chi^2_{children}(1, 81)=11.00$ ;  $\chi^2_{married}(1, 81)=5.19$ . We conducted ANOVAs to test differences in age ( $F(1, 81)=4.74$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and duration of the relation ( $p>.50$ ). Row means not sharing a common subscript differ at  $p<.05$ .

### Differences Between the Conflicts

We first controlled for potential differences between the two types of conflicts and examined whether there were major differences between the types of conflicts in terms of the causes of the conflict and the experience and expression of anger. We first conducted a MANOVA with gender and relationship context as between-subject factors and scenario as within-subject factor and the five reasons for the conflict as dependent measures. We only found a multivariate effect of conflict type,  $F(5,75)=2.40$ ,  $p<.05$ , partial  $\eta^2=.14$ , that showed that in the relationship conflict participants less often reported that an agreement had been broken ( $M=2.15$ ;  $SD=1.75$ ), and more often reported that they had been insulted ( $M=3.29$ ;  $SD=1.97$ ) and disrespected ( $M=3.64$ ,  $SD=2.26$ ) than in the financial scenario ( $M_{broken\ agreement}=2.75$ ,  $SD=2.09$ ;  $M_{insult}=2.52$ ;  $SD=1.77$ ;  $M_{disrespect}=2.96$ ;  $SD=1.89$ ). We next performed a repeated measures ANOVA with the experience and expression of anger as dependent measures and found no main or interaction effects with conflict type (all  $F_s<1$ ).

Because we did not find differences in the way in which men and women experienced and expressed their anger in the two types of conflict, we collapsed the responses over the two scenarios.

### Characteristics of the Conflict

In order to explore any differences in the characteristics of the conflicts, we first analyzed whether the time when the reported conflicts took place was different, in an ANOVA with gender and relationship context as factors. No significant main or interaction effects occurred (all  $F_s<2$ ). We also examined whether men and women in different relationship contexts reported different frequencies of the reported conflicts, and found no significant effects of gender or relationship context (all  $F_s<2$ ). We finally analyzed who started the conflict, and found a main effect of gender,  $F(1,78)=4.81$ ,  $p<.04$ , partial  $\eta^2=.06$ , indicating

that men ( $M=4.29$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ) more often reported that their partner initiated the conflict than women ( $M=3.87$ ,  $SD=1.44$ ). Men ( $M=4.15$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ) also more often reported that they thought they contributed most to the solution of the conflict than did women ( $M=3.10$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ),  $F(1,78)=7.81$ ,  $p<.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.17$ .

### Emotional Reactions to the Conflict

All (M)ANOVAs reported below include gender of participant and relationship context as between-subject factors.

#### Subjective Anger

We predicted that women would report more intense anger than men. An ANOVA with anger as dependent measure showed a multivariate main effect of gender,  $F(1,78)=5.24$ ,  $p<.03$ , partial  $\eta^2=.07$ , and no main effect of relationship context or interaction between relationship context and gender,  $F<1$ . The gender effect showed that women ( $M=5.14$ ;  $SD=.48$ ) reported more anger than did men ( $M=4.53$ ;  $SD=1.23$ ). Further, we did not hypothesize main or interaction effects for the *coercion goal*, and this indeed was not found, all  $p$  values higher than .10.

#### Type of Anger Expression

The second prediction held that women in traditional relations would report less direct anger expressions, more indirect anger expression, and more suppression of their anger than men in traditional relationships, whereas we did not expect any of these gender differences in egalitarian relationships. A MANOVA with gender and relationship context, and direct anger expression, indirect expressions, and anger suppression as dependent measures showed a significant multivariate main effect of gender,  $F(3,75)=16.18$ ,  $p<.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.39$ , and of relationship context,  $F(3,75)=8.97$ ,  $p<.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.26$ ; these were qualified by a significant interaction,  $F(3,75)=2.41$ ,  $p<.01$ , partial  $\eta^2=.17$ .

The univariate analyses showed that the main effect of gender was significant for all three expressions: direct anger

expression  $F(1,77)=4.24$ ,  $p<.05$ , partial  $\eta^2=.06$ , indirect anger expression,  $F(1,77)=47.13$ ,  $p<.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.38$ , and suppression,  $F(1,77)=4.77$ ,  $p<.07$ , partial  $\eta^2=.03$ : overall, women reported more suppression and indirect anger expressions than did men, whereas men reported more direct expressions (see Table 2 for the means). The main effect of relationship context was univariately significant for suppression,  $F(1,77)=11.22$ ,  $p<.001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.13$ , and direct expression,  $F(1,77)=7.65$ ,  $p<.01$ , partial  $\eta^2=.09$ , and marginally significant for indirect expression,  $F(1,77)=3.03$ ,  $p<.09$ , partial  $\eta^2=.04$ , with participants in traditional relationships showing more suppression, less direct expression, but also slightly less indirect anger than participants in egalitarian relations.

The interaction was univariately significant for antagonism,  $F(1,80)=10.26$ ,  $p<.01$ , partial  $\eta^2=.12$ , and for suppression of anger,  $F(1,80)=9.89$ ,  $p<.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.15$ , but not for indirect expressions,  $F(1,80)<1$ . In line with the third prediction, simple main effects showed that women in traditional relationships reported less direct anger and suppressed their anger more than men in traditional relationships (see Table 2 for the means).

#### Control for Age, Marital Status, Children and Duration of Relationship

The reported multivariate analyses with subjective experiences and expressions were also conducted with age, marital status, having children, and relationship duration as covariates, but none of these factors were significant predictors, nor was there any interaction with gender of respondent or relationship context.

#### Negative Social Appraisals

In order to test the prediction that gender and relationship context should influence negative social appraisals, we conducted an ANOVA with negative social appraisals. This revealed a multivariate main effect of gender,  $F(1,78)=10.40$ ,  $p<.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.16$ , and relationship context,  $F(2,77)=5.06$ ,  $p<.03$ , partial  $\eta^2=.06$ , qualified by a

**Table 2** Means (standard deviations in parentheses) for anger reactions broken down by gender of respondent and relationship context (all scales range from 1–7)

	Traditional		Egalitarian	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Anger	4.69 <sup>a</sup> (1.36)	5.26 <sup>a</sup> (.96)	4.43 <sup>a</sup> (1.09)	4.97 <sup>a</sup> (1.02)
Direct anger expression	3.55 <sup>a</sup> (1.03)	2.76 <sup>b</sup> (1.27)	3.67 <sup>a</sup> (.91)	3.78 <sup>a</sup> (.85)
Indirect anger expression	1.36 <sup>a</sup> (.50)	2.63 <sup>b</sup> (.90)	1.60 <sup>a</sup> (.48)	3.10 <sup>b</sup> (1.43)
Anger suppression	2.16 <sup>a</sup> (.80)	2.97 <sup>b</sup> (1.09)	1.95 <sup>a</sup> (.71)	1.86 <sup>a</sup> (.85)
Coercion	3.49 <sup>a</sup> (1.08)	3.26 <sup>a</sup> (.84)	3.50 <sup>a</sup> (.71)	3.87 <sup>a</sup> (.96)
Negative social appraisal	1.80 <sup>a</sup> (.47)	3.45 <sup>b</sup> (1.11)	2.20 <sup>a</sup> (.57)	2.19 <sup>a</sup> (1.04)

Row means not sharing a common subscript differ at  $p<.05$ .

significant interaction,  $F(1, 78)=16.79, p<.0001$ , partial  $\eta^2=.18$ .

### Moderated Mediation

Finally, we tested whether the interaction between gender and relationship context on direct anger expressions and anger suppression was mediated by negative social appraisals. We conducted a series of regression analyses following the procedure laid out by Baron and Kenny (1986), for traditional and egalitarian relationship contexts separately. We first regressed gender (dummy coded: 0=men, 1=women) on direct anger expression, which showed that the overall model was not significant for egalitarian relationships, but only for traditional relationships,  $F(1, 38)=9.92, p<.01$ . This was also the case for all other regression equations, so we will only report the regressions within the traditional relationship contexts.

Gender predicted direct anger expressions and negative social appraisals (see Fig. 1). This indicates that women reported less direct anger expressions and stronger negative social appraisals; further, negative social appraisals predicted direct anger expressions, implying that more negative social appraisals predicted direct anger expressions in a negative way. Adding negative social appraisals to the equation showed that the effect of gender disappeared, which implies full mediation of negative social appraisals in traditional relationship contexts.

### Discussion

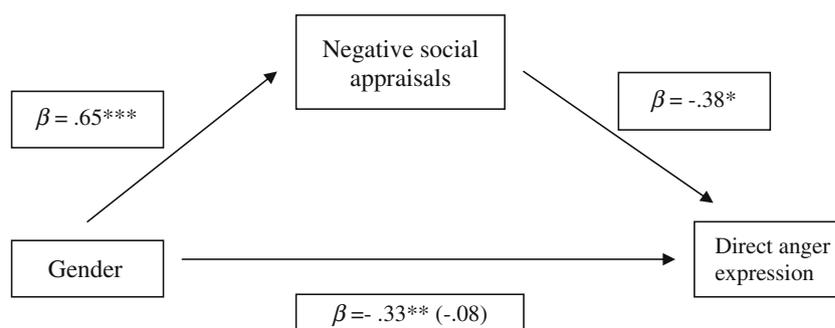
The results provide support for the assumption that men and women in different relationship contexts react emotionally differently to interpersonal conflict situations. First of all, women reported more intense anger than did men in both conflict situations. In line with the first prediction, we did not find an interaction with relationship context for the subjective experience of anger, hence women were more angry, independently of relationship context. The reason for the conflict, in terms of insulting behavior, breaking an appointment, or ignoring the partner did not differ for men and

women. According to the male participants, women had initiated the conflict more often, although women did not think this was the case. Thus, only men believed that their partner initiated the conflict more often than they had themselves. This is in agreement with previous research that shows that if gender differences are found, women more often report anger in reaction to their partner. Research on marital conflicts (Christensen and Heavey 1993) further demonstrates that women more often start the conflict and are the demanding and accusing partner. This may reflect women's stronger relational needs and concerns (Cross et al. 2000), but it may also indicate that women more often experience unfair treatment by their partners (see also Kluwer et al. 2009). Men on the other hand may more often think that these issues are less important, or not worth a conflict.

We further assumed that once angry, the emotivational goal for men and women would be similar, namely to try to force a change upon the other person. The way in which this goal is reached, however, that is, the way men and women express their anger, would be different (second prediction). This is indeed what we found. In line with Social Role Theory, most gender differences in anger expression were found in the traditional couples. Women in traditional relationships suppressed their anger more, whereas men expressed their anger more directly, thus in more antagonistic way. These anger expressions fit the traditional relationship contexts, with women being more focused on harmony within the relationship, and men more on achievements outside the relationship context. It is also interesting to note that although there was no effect of relationship context on subjective anger, both men and women reported to be less expressive of their anger in traditional relationship contexts, which suggests that in these relationships there are stronger display rules that do not allow individuals to express such emotions.

We also found a gender difference that did not interact with relationship context, namely the indirect expression of anger, such as sharing one's anger with others, gossiping with others, or bursting into tears. This indirect expression of anger was more often reported by women in all relationship contexts. This effect may be explained by the inclusion of crying in this scale, because crying is an emotion expression

**Fig. 1** Testing moderated mediation of social appraisals in predicting gender differences in direct anger expressions in traditional relationship contexts



that is far more prevalent in women, independent of context (see also Fischer et al. 2004; Vingerhoets and Scheirs 2000).

As predicted (prediction three and four), women reported more negative social appraisals, thus expecting more negative interpersonal consequences of their anger expressions than men. This main effect was qualified by an interaction, however, indicating that this difference was only found in traditional relationship contexts. In egalitarian relationships men and women reported to expect equally negative implications of their anger expressions. In line with our predictions, we also found that in the traditional relationship contexts the pattern of gender differences in direct anger expression and suppression was mediated by these negative social appraisals. Women in these relationships may feel intense anger, just like the men in these contexts, but they feel more anxious than men about the consequences of showing their anger overtly. This finding is in line with Shields' suggestion that women doubt whether they are actually entitled to be angry, because it does not fit with their traditional gender role (Shields 2002). In other words, the social costs of direct and critical confrontation are considered higher for women than for men in traditional relationship contexts, as indicated by women's stronger negative social appraisals. These results also show that although anger goals are similar across genders and contexts, the way in which one expects to force a change in the anger target varies with the context in which the anger is evoked. In sum, whether one regulates one's anger depends on the type of relationship to which men and women have committed themselves.

The current findings with respect to direct anger expression and suppression of anger in different relationship contexts are also in line with the results from an analysis of anger expressions of men and women in countries that predicate either more traditional or more egalitarian relations, which shows that women express their anger more directly than men in countries with a more egalitarian gender ideology (Fischer et al. 2004).

We believe that the results of this study reflect differences in how men and women enact different roles, depending on the type of relationship they have. The differences in hours of paid work between men and women in the different relationship contexts were related to differences in power balance, and we argue that these are important elements of gender roles. Moreover, we have controlled for potential confounding variables, such as age, marital status, duration of relationship, and whether or not the participant had children, and none of these variables had a significant effect on the dependent measures in this study.

A potential limitation of the present research methodology is that the data are collected through self-reports, which may have lead to biases in favor of the existing gender stereotypes. For example, women in egalitarian role contexts may have downplayed their powerlessness,

because this did not fit their self-concept. We indeed do not know to what extent this has been the case, so gender role ideologies may have affected the reports. Yet, it has been shown that such self-stereotyping biases especially occur when global measures are used ('how angry are you, generally?'), and when the delay between an occurrence of the emotional event and the time at which questions are posed increases, so that respondents base their answers on vague recollections of the event and gender-stereotypic beliefs (Robinson and Clore 2002; Robinson et al. 1998). We believe that such biases were avoided as much as possible by asking about specific and most recent conflicts. Respondents generally reported events that took place some weeks before the study and there was no difference in delay for men and women. We do recommend, however, that other more implicit measures may be used in future research.

In short, we think that the present study contributes to our knowledge of gender differences in anger and anger regulation. Anger is regulated differently by men and women, such that the social benefits are higher than the social costs. This also relates to recent work on the motives of emotion regulation (e.g., Tamir et al. 2007), suggesting that not only hedonistic, but also social motives lead to emotion regulation activities. More generally, we think that women and men perceive different social costs and benefits in relation to the expression of specific emotions.

**Acknowledgement** We want to thank Laura te Hennepe, for collecting the data for this study.

## Appendix A

Original Dutch version and English translation of the questionnaire

### Characteristics of the Conflict

Which of the following causes applied to the conflict?	Wat was de belangrijkste aanleiding voor het conflict?
My partner did not meet an agreement	Mijn partner kwam een afspraak niet na
My partner insulted me	Mijn partner beledigde mij
My partner showed inappropriate behavior	Mijn partner gedroeg zich ongepast
My partner showed no respect	Mijn partner toonde geen respect
My partner ignored me	Mijn partner negeerde mij
How long ago this conflict had taken place	Hoe lang geleden vond dit conflict plaats?
How many of such conflicts they had had	Hoe vaak heeft u een dergelijk conflict gehad met uw partner?
Who initiated the conflict	Wie begon het conflict?
Who contributed most to solving the conflict?	Wie heeft het meest bijgedragen aan een oplossing van het conflict?

## Subjective Anger

How intense was your anger	Hoe boos was u?
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## Anger Expression

I criticized my partner	Ik gaf kritiek op mijn partner
I said I was angry	Ik zei dat ik boos was
I scolded my partner	Ik schold mijn partner uit
I verbally attacked my partner	Ik haalde verbaal scherp uit
<i>Indirect anger:</i>	
I shared y anger with others (gossiping),	Ik deelde mijn boosheid met anderen
I did not know what to do	Ik wist niet wat ik moest doen
I burst into tears	Ik barstte in tranen uit
<i>Anger suppression</i>	
I redirected my anger towards someone else	Ik uitte mijn boosheid tegen anderen
I suppressed my anger	Ik onderdrukte mijn boosheid
I did not show anything	Ik liet niets van mijn boosheid zien

## Coercion Goal

I wanted my partner to take me serious	Ik wilde dat mijn partner me serieus nam
I experienced control over my partner	Ik had controle over mijn partner
I felt strong with respect to my partner	Ik voelde me sterk tegenover mijn partner
I wanted my partner to change his or her behavior	Ik wilde dat mijn partner zijn/haar gedrag veranderde
I wanted to influence my partner	Ik wilde mijn partner beïnvloeden

## Negative Social Appraisals

I was afraid that the situation got worse	Ik was bang dat de situatie zou verslechteren
I was afraid of revenge	Ik was bang voor wraak
I expected negative effects for our relationship	Ik verwachtte negatieve effecten voor onze relatie
I could not stand against my partner	Ik kon niet tegen mijn partner op
I worried that my partner would like me less	Ik was bezorgd dat mijn partner me minder zou mogen

## Relational Power

I am the one who takes the decisions	In onze relatie ben ik meestal degene die de beslissingen neemt
I am the most dominant in the relationship	Ik ben het meest dominant in onze relatie
We mostly do what my partner wants (rev.)	We doen meestal wat mijn partner vindt
I decide what to do with respect to finances	Op financieel gebied neem ik over het algemeen de beslissingen
I decide what to do with respect to the activities we undertake	Wat betreft onze activiteiten in vrije tijd, neem ik in het algemeen de beslissingen

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