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WHY DO WE FEEL ANGER... BUT NURTURE HATRED? AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE ON THE EMOTIONAL ROOTS OF INTERGROUP CONFLICT

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Abstract

Anger and hatred are often conflated, yet they serve distinct evolutionary functions. While anger is a fast, reactive emotion aimed at correcting behavior, hatred is slower, more deliberate, and oriented toward exclusion or elimination. This paper explores the evolutionary roots of both emotions, highlighting their adaptive roles in interpersonal and intergroup contexts. Drawing from evolutionary psychology, affective science, and organizational behavior, we examine how anger facilitates immediate responses to norm violations, whereas hatred develops through narrative reinforcement and identity threats. Additionally, we consider how cultural context influences the expression of these emotions and explore the relationship between anger, hatred, and the desire for revenge. Understanding these distinctions has ethical and practical implications for intercultural management and conflict resolution in organizational settings.

Keywords: Anger; Hatred; Evolutionary Psychology; Intergroup Conflict; Emotions; Ethics; Intercultural Management; Organizational Behavior

1. Introduction

The emotional repertoire of the human species has been shaped over millennia of evolution to serve adaptive functions. Among these emotions, anger and hatred stand out for their roles in regulating social interactions, maintaining group cohesion, and responding to threats. However, while these two emotions are often treated as similar in both lay and academic discourse (e.g., Golden, n.d.; Van Doorn, 2018), their evolutionary roots, psychological mechanisms, and social consequences diverge significantly (Sell & Lopez, 2019).

Understanding the distinction between anger and hatred is especially relevant in today's world of increasing cultural contact, polarization, and organizational complexity. In intercultural settings, where misunderstandings and identity threats are more likely to arise, misinterpreting these emotions may hinder effective conflict resolution and ethical leadership. This paper aims to clarify the distinction between anger and hatred from an evolutionary perspective and to explore their implications for ethics and intercultural management.

2. Conceptual distinctions between anger and hatred: from flash to furnace

Anger is a primary, evolutionarily conserved emotion that flares within milliseconds of a perceived norm violation, personal insult, or goal obstruction. It is fast, automatic, and deeply rooted in subcortical structures such as the amygdala and hypothalamus, which coordinate the fight-or-flight response. Physiologically, anger triggers sympathetic arousal - elevated heart rate, blood pressure, and hormonal activation—preparing the organism for confrontation or immediate corrective action. Psychologically, anger is goal-corrective: the

angry individual attempts to raise the social cost of another's action to compel behavioral change or reparation (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009; Sznycer et al., 2017).

Hatred, by contrast, is neither immediate nor transient. It is a secondary, composite emotion - less reactive and more reflective -requiring cognitive scaffolding to emerge. It draws upon narrated grievances, episodic memory, identity-protective cognition, and morally laden appraisals. The mind constructs a narrative of enduring malevolence attributed to an outgroup or individual. Unlike anger, which seeks behavioral change, hatred seeks existential resolution: exclusion, elimination, or permanent subordination of the target (Sternberg, 2003; Mott, 2024).

Neurocognitively, hatred activates regions of the brain associated with emotion (e.g., insula and putamen), cognitive control, and ideological commitment (e.g., medial prefrontal cortex). These circuits overlap with those involved in moral reasoning and reward processing, meaning that acts of hate—especially when framed as righteous—can be subjectively gratifying (Zeki & Romaya, 2008; Haidt, 2003; Halperin, 2011; Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Masten, Morelli, & Eisenberger, 2010).

Experimental studies demonstrate that anger can lead to negotiation and reconciliation when the offending party signals remorse or offers compensation (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2011; Fitness, 2000; Lindebaum & Gabriel, 2016). Anger assumes the relationship is still valuable. In contrast, hatred dehumanizes and reduces empathy, making reconciliation unlikely. Hatred motivates negation, not negotiation.

The social and political consequences are significant. Anger may underline protest or demands for justice, while hatred fuels exclusion, persecution, or extermination. The shift from anger to hatred becomes especially dangerous when institutionalized - through propaganda, moral justifications, or collective rituals (Wrangham, 2018).

Historical cases such as the Rwandan genocide, the Holocaust, or the Yugoslav wars illustrate how anger can be manipulated and magnified into genocidal hatred through propaganda, dehumanization, and moral justifications for violence.

Anger often motivates individuals to engage with the offender because it assumes that the social relationship is still worth preserving. In contrast, hatred dehumanizes the target and reduces empathy, making reconciliation far less likely (Halperin, 2011). Individuals or groups consumed by hatred no longer seek behavioral reform but rather the eradication of perceived threat.

From an evolutionary perspective, the roots of this distinction lie in the adaptive functions of each emotion. Anger evolved as an in-group regulatory tool, managing fairness, enforcing norms, and deterring exploitation in face-to-face interactions. Hatred, by contrast, may have evolved in the context of chronic intergroup competition, where long-term strategies of exclusion or elimination conferred survival advantages to the in-group (Wrangham, 2018). While anger is tactical, hatred is strategic. It prepares the group for sustained conflict, sometimes across generations, often sustained through collective memory, myth, and symbolic rituals.

Understanding this distinction is critical not only for psychological theory but also for conflict resolution, policymaking, and peacebuilding. Addressing anger may require justice and apology; dismantling hatred demands narrative change, identity transformation, and the rebuilding of moral regard between groups.

3. Evolutionary foundations

As noted by Cosmides and Tooby (2000), emotions evolved as functionally specialized programs shaped by natural selection to solve recurrent adaptive problems, including the regulation of within-group cooperation and management of intergroup conflict.

3.1 Anger: policing cooperation within groups

In ancestral environments, cooperation was vital but fragile. Anger evolved as an emotional system to maintain cooperation and deter exploitation. According to the recalibration theory of anger (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009), anger functions as a bargaining tool, activated when social treatment is perceived as unfair. It signals readiness to impose costs, prompting behavioral change.

The intensity of anger correlates with relative formidability (physical strength or social capital) making threats credible (Sell et al., 2009; Sell et al., 2014). Anger operates as a norm enforcement system, preserving social cohesion and regulating reciprocity. It also signals reputational resolve: a willingness to defend fairness norms and avoid exploitation.

In small-scale human societies such as hunter-gatherer bands, cooperation yielded significant mutual benefits -ranging from food sharing and mutual defense to child-rearing and resource pooling. However, such interdependence also exposed groups to the persistent risk of free-riding, whereby individuals might reap the benefits of group efforts without contributing proportionally. From an evolutionary perspective, this posed a recurrent adaptive problem: how to maintain cooperation while minimizing exploitation. One key emotional solution to this problem is anger.

As I mentioned earlier, according to the recalibration theory of anger proposed by Sell, Tooby, and Cosmides (2009), anger evolved as a bargaining mechanism that functions to renegotiate social treatment when an individual perceives that they are being undervalued or exploited. Anger arises when a social partner imposes costs or withholds benefits in a way that violates the perceiver's expectations of equitable exchange. The emotional signal of anger communicates a readiness to impose retaliatory costs, thereby motivating the offending party to adjust their behavior to avoid further social damage.

Crucially, the intensity of anger is not random but correlates with the individual's relative formidability - whether physical (strength, fighting ability) or coalition (social allies, prestige). This ensures that threats issued in anger are credible. The more formidable an individual, the more likely it is that their anger will prompt corrective action from others (Sell et al., 2009). This linkage between emotional intensity and bargaining power reinforces social hierarchies and calibrates threat potential, allowing anger to operate as an efficient tool of social negotiation.

Anger, then, is not merely a disruptive emotion. It is a form of rapid norm enforcement that acts to preserve relationships rather than dissolve them. When appropriately interpreted and reciprocated, anger facilitates the recalibration of unfair dynamics without requiring social rupture. It is this recalibrate function that renders anger evolutionarily adaptive: it salvages cooperation under strain and deters repeated violations by increasing the social cost of exploitation.

Moreover, anger operates as a kind of social surveillance system. It alerts others to breaches of fairness and serves as a reputational cue, signaling that one is not easily exploited. In this sense, anger helps sustain cooperation by deterring opportunism and reinforcing norms of mutual obligation. The public expression of anger (even when restrained) may thus serve both strategic and communicative functions in social groups.

Empirical research further supports the idea that anger is sensitive to contextual cost-benefit dynamics. For example, individuals are more likely to express anger when they believe they can achieve beneficial change, and less likely to do so when retaliation would be ineffective or dangerous (Van Kleef et al., 2011). This flexibility suggests that anger is not simply a reactive impulse but an evolved computational system for managing reciprocity.

Ultimately, anger evolved as a fast-response, cost-imposing mechanism for regulating within-group cooperation. It serves to recalibrate social valuations, deter exploitation, and preserve group cohesion, all of which were essential for survival in ancestral environments

characterized by repeated interactions among interdependent individuals. Properly understood, anger is less a threat to social order than a tool for maintaining it.

3.2 Hatred: coalitional psychology and intergroup threat

Hatred may have evolved as an adaptation to chronic intergroup conflict. Unlike anger, it is not responsive to short-term reciprocity but mobilizes coalitions for long-term elimination or suppression of outgroup threats (Sternberg, 2003; Wrangham, 2018). It activates moral disgust, loyalty, and symbolic justifications.

Hatred suppresses empathy and amplifies commitment to one's group. It prepares the group for prolonged antagonism, transmitted across generations through cultural narratives and rituals. While anger recalibrates relationships, hatred reclassifies the other as unworthy of moral concern. Bernhard, Fischbacher, and Fehr (2006) showed that parochial altruism can emerge as a mechanism to favor in-group cohesion while sustaining hostility toward out-groups, supporting the evolutionary logic of hatred as a coalitional adaptation.

This aligns with the idea proposed by Brewer (1999) that in-group favoritism does not necessarily imply out-group hatred, yet evolutionary pressures may still lead to negative attitudes toward out-groups when group identity is threatened.

3.3 The role of revenge

Revenge is a psychological mechanism that connects anger and hatred. Initially triggered by anger, the desire for revenge can evolve into hatred when grievances are moralized and collective (Van Doorn, 2018; Sell & Lopez, 2019). Revenge seeks to restore balance or inflict proportional harm. When retaliation is no longer about justice but group purification, hatred has taken over. This transition is critical for understanding how interpersonal conflicts escalate into intergroup violence.

3.4 Social and Organizational Implications

In organizational contexts -particularly within multicultural or multinational environments - the distinction between anger and hatred is not merely semantic; it is operationally and ethically critical. Emotions do not arise in a vacuum. They are shaped, triggered, and reinforced by the social architecture of the workplace: its norms, hierarchies, narratives, and incentives. Anger, when correctly interpreted, often signals a breakdown in expectations around fairness, reciprocity, or status recognition (Fitness, 2000; Lindebaum & Gabriel, 2016). It may indicate a transient but tractable issue that can be addressed through dialogue, mediation, or procedural justice interventions. When anger is met with acknowledgement and corrective action, the emotional system recalibrates, restoring cooperation without rupturing social bonds.

By contrast, hatred reflects a qualitatively different process. It does not emerge from single incidents but from the accumulation of perceived grievances, often embedded in identity-relevant narratives. In diverse organizations, hatred can surface when group boundaries become rigid, when symbolic markers of difference (e.g., language, dress, religious practices) are framed as threats, or when repeated slights go unaddressed. Research in social psychology shows that moralized emotions such as contempt and disgust - often precursors to hatred - are activated when individuals feel their group is under existential or symbolic attack (Haidt, 2003; Sternberg, 2003). Unlike anger, hatred is less responsive to pragmatic compromise because it recruits narrative, ideological, and moral frameworks that cast the other as irredeemable.

For organizational leaders and diversity managers, the implications are profound. Ethical intercultural management requires emotional literacy -not only in detecting

expressions of anger or hatred but in decoding their evolutionary function and likely trajectories. Anger that is misread as hatred may lead to overreaction, punitive escalation, or the pathologization of legitimate dissent. Conversely, hatred mistaken for mere irritation can result in the dangerous underestimation of chronic intergroup tensions, allowing hostility to metastasize beneath the surface.

To prevent this, organizations must move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and invest in emotional infrastructure: leadership development programs that train managers in emotional diagnosis and regulation; communication systems that provide rapid channels for expressing and resolving grievances; and rituals or shared goals that reframe intergroup dynamics in terms of cooperation rather than competition. Organizational storytelling is particularly powerful in this regard. Narratives that reinforce a shared mission, mutual respect, and historical reconciliation can inhibit the spread of moralized hatred by recoding adversaries as fellow contributors to a common fate (Schein, 2010; Dutton et al., 2014).

Ultimately, the management of antagonistic emotions in culturally diverse organizations is not simply a matter of interpersonal skill but a systemic challenge. It involves recognizing that our evolved psychology, shaped in environments of tribal conflict and coalitional competition, is still active in boardrooms, factory floors, and digital workspaces. Anger and hatred must therefore be anticipated, not denied; managed, not suppressed. Only by aligning organizational design with the emotional architecture of human nature can we create workplaces that are not just inclusive, but resilient in the face of inevitable conflict.

4. Cultural variation in emotional expression

Emotions are biologically grounded but culturally modulated. The expression and acceptability of anger and hatred vary across cultures (Gelfand, 2011). Tight cultures, which prioritize order and conformity, tend to suppress anger in favor of social harmony. Loose cultures, by contrast, may tolerate or even valorize expressive anger. Hatred, especially when moralized, may be more easily inflamed in collectivist societies where group loyalty and symbolic threat are heightened. Henrich (2020) argues that WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) societies produce psychological profiles that differ significantly from the human species' ancestral norm, influencing how emotions like anger and hatred are expressed and interpreted.

Understanding these cultural lenses is essential for interpreting emotional responses and designing effective intercultural interventions. Emotional misreading -e.g., interpreting anger as hatred - can derail conflict resolution efforts. Intercultural competence thus requires emotional literacy informed by evolutionary and cultural psychology.

5. Organizational and ethical implications

In organizational contexts, anger can signal a breach of fairness and motivate reform. When managed ethically, it facilitates norm restoration and social cohesion. Hatred, however, reflects entrenched identity conflicts and resists pragmatic resolution. Leaders must distinguish between the two to intervene appropriately.

Ethical leadership requires structures for emotional expression, procedures for grievance resolution, and narratives that reframe group boundaries. Anger can be addressed through justice mechanisms. Hatred requires deeper symbolic transformation.

6. Discussion and future directions

Anger and hatred are not simply different in degree - they reflect distinct evolutionary functions and demand distinct management strategies. Anger regulates reciprocity; hatred

mobilizes coalitional aggression. Misinterpreting one for the other - e.g., treating anger as hate or underestimating hatred—can have grave consequences.

Future research should combine longitudinal neuroscience, field experiments in multicultural organizations, and cultural psychology to identify interventions that deactivate hatred and harness the regulatory potential of anger. Emotional management in complex societies depends on an accurate reading of our evolved psychology.

7. Conclusion

Anger is a recalibration tool; hatred is an existential rejection. Their distinction is not semantic -it is strategic. Leaders, mediators, and policymakers must recognize their different trajectories to prevent polarization and promote reconciliation. Emotional intelligence grounded in evolutionary insight offers a path toward ethical and effective intercultural management.

Moreover, distinguishing between these emotions is not only academically relevant but practically urgent in a world increasingly shaped by cultural contact, ideological polarization, and digital amplification of emotional content. In organizational and political contexts, anger may offer opportunities for repair and renegotiation - when it is correctly identified and addressed. Hatred, however, often signals a deeper, more entrenched breakdown in social cohesion that requires systemic interventions: narrative reconstruction, symbolic healing, and institutional reconfiguration.

Thus, understanding the evolutionary functions and modern manifestations of anger and hatred is essential to preventing their escalation into large-scale conflict. As societies grapple with complex moral, cultural, and political tensions, managing these emotions with precision and foresight becomes not just a scholarly endeavor, but a civic imperative.

The capacity to read these emotions accurately, and respond to them constructively, may well define the resilience of future pluralistic societies. Their distinction is not semantic, it is strategic. Leaders, mediators, and policymakers must recognize their different trajectories to prevent polarization and promote reconciliation. Emotional intelligence grounded in evolutionary insight offers a path toward ethical and effective intercultural management.

Anger and hatred are not interchangeable. Each has its own evolutionary logic, psychological structure, and social function. In ethical and intercultural contexts, understanding this difference can make the difference between resolving a conflict and perpetuating it. Anger may offer a window for dialogue; hatred often signals that the window has closed.

Anger and hatred are also not merely different in intensity; they are distinct evolutionary solutions to divergent adaptive problems. Conflating them, whether in academic discourse, media narratives or practical conflict management, obscures strategic intervention points and risks exacerbating rather than resolving tensions. By correctly reading the emotional signal, leaders, mediators and policy designers can transform flashpoints into opportunities for dialogue, while preventing the ember of hatred from igniting into an inferno of polarization or violence.

This distinction is crucial because emotions are not epiphenomena; they have evolved algorithms that structure social life. They direct attention, allocate energy and shape alliances. Anger and hatred, although sometimes co-occurring, lie on different trajectories of antagonistic motivation. Anger is typically reactive, short-term, and interpersonal. It functions as a recalibration tool: an emotional ledger that flags norm violations and temporarily raises the cost of non-cooperation. Its adaptive utility lies in its capacity to correct courses without severing ties. Hatred, by contrast, is protracted, coalitional and deeply symbolic. It reclassifies the other not as a wayward partner in cooperation, but as an existential threat—

subhuman, immoral, and irredeemable. Where anger seeks renegotiation, hatred seeks elimination or insulation.

This is not a semantic distinction; it is a strategic imperative. In diplomacy, community policing, and organizational leadership, misreading hatred as anger invites superficial responses: apologies where ideology needs deconstruction, fairness workshops where identity boundaries must be reimagined. Conversely, treating ordinary expressions of anger as pathological “hate” not only trivializes real hatred but risks chilling honest dissent and weakening norm enforcement. Emotional over pathologization is itself a cultural hazard.

The evolutionary lens offers a sharper toolkit. Because anger is responsive to cost–benefit recalculations, interventions aimed at restoring fairness, through compensation, face-saving, public acknowledgement or procedural justice, can effectively discharge the emotion. Hatred, however, is narratively embedded and normatively shielded. It feeds on stories: of past betrayals, collective victimhood, moral contamination. Therefore, reducing hatred requires symbolic interventions that alter meaning structures. These include counter-narratives, truth and reconciliation processes, inclusive rituals, cross-group mentoring, and institutionally sustained superordinate identities. Such mechanisms don’t erase difference – they recode it in terms of interdependence rather than antagonism.

Future research must adopt an integrative methodology: combining longitudinal neuroimaging to map the plasticity of circuits sustaining antagonistic emotions with real-world field experiments across polarized communities, post-conflict societies and multicultural organizations. How malleable are the neural and hormonal substrates of hatred? What is the time horizon for emotional reframing? Which structural interventions show replicable success in deactivating identity-based animosity?

Ultimately, the task of ethical leadership in the twenty-first century may not be to suppress conflict entirely – a utopian and evolutionary unrealistic goal – but to distinguish productive anger from destructive hatred, and to channel both into formats that preserve pluralism while preventing fragmentation. This demands not neutrality, but moral courage: the ability to respond to the emotional logics of our evolved minds without being enslaved by them. In a century marked by rapid demographic change, digital tribalism and declining institutional trust, our survival as cooperative societies may well depend on it.

Finally, recognizing when we are facing one or the other emotion is not just an academic exercise – it is a practical necessity for leaders, policymakers, and organizations navigating an increasingly complex emotional and cultural landscape.

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