

Criticism Not Always Make You Angry: The Effect of Criticism and Sensitivity to Criticism Toward Anger

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Abstract

Emotion is a psychological aspect that influences people's actions and behaviors. Anger is one of the negative emotions that can arise due to various factors, including criticism. Individuals have a different threshold for criticism called sensitivity to criticism. This study aims to examine the effect of giving criticism on one's anger and the impact of sensitivity to criticism to participants' level of anger. This research used a mixed-method approach through experimental methods, interviews, and observations. The experiment research design used was a pre-test post-test control group design. The participants involved 15 undergraduates allocated into experimental group (8 participants) and control group (7 participants). The instruments used to measure anger was the adaptation of STAXI developed by Spielberger, and the sensitivity to criticism scale was used to measure sensitivity to criticism. The results showed no effect of giving criticism on increasing anger in the experimental group. In addition, Pearson correlation results between sensitivity to criticism and anger showed no impact of sensitivity to criticism on their anger. However, the interview noticed that participants experienced anxiety, anger, and fear. Instead of not feeling anger, the subject tried to hold back the feelings of anger and had similar experiences so that the criticism given had no effect. Similar to the interview result, we observed that participants showed multiple signs of anxiety such as fiddling their fingers and toes or showing a worried look.

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INTRODUCTION

Every human might struggle with negative emotion such as anger (Litvak et al, 2010; Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). Anger is a reaction of frustration, hurt, disappointment, and humiliation (Hendricks et al., 2013). For example, an American called Kevin Chenais has been rejected to get in the plane or other transportation for his obesity, a discrimination stimulated individual's anger (Patnistik, 2016). Thus, this study focuses on factors that might affect anger.

Critic is considered as factor that stimulates anger (Harmon-Jones, 2003). A critic is defined as verbal or written evaluation to others. When individual has no control to criticize or humiliate others could increase left-frontal brain activity that led to anger and aggressivity (Harmon-Jones, 2003). While previous researchers found that positive critics might more acceptably compared to negative critics (Hornsey et al, 2002), it might support the various respond recorded toward the critics. More important, how individual react to critics also been influenced by age (Thomas, 2022), gender (Clay et al., 1996), social status (Kitayama, et al; 2013) or cultural background (Hornsey et al., 2005; Hornsey et al., 2002). Thus, while some studies showed that there was positive correlation between perceived criticism toward anger in some situations, it is important to note that other individuals' differences such as sensitivity to criticism might moderate those association.

Apart from criticism, sensitivity to criticism might also influence on how individuals react to critics that lead to anger (Geraldine et al., 2008). Sensitivity to criticism is described with two characteristics: low sensitivity or has low threshold toward critical feedback and high sensitivity or high emotional and feeling hurt towards negative feedback (Atlas, 1994). Those who are extremely sensitive to criticism may be more susceptible to turn angry in response to unfavourable comments, especially when they are under stress (Geraldine et al., 2008). Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of rejection sensitivity were more likely get angry when faced with a mock rejection scenario than people with lower levels of rejection sensitivity (O'Connor et al., 2003).

To sum up, there were some studies conducted in Western countries noted that individuals might experience anger when they were perceived negative feedback or criticism (Niemann, 2014). However, individuals also have various responses onto negative feedback (see Shao & Martin, 2020). The inconsistent results might appear as some other variables are more likely to influence the association between perceived criticism toward individuals' anger. Furthermore, the research result evidence about factors that lead to anger was less documented in the Asian contexts warrant to be explored as culture might has important role in the individuals' emotion (see Yu et al., 2021; Shao & Martin, 2020). This current study is aimed at examining the effect of perceived criticism toward individuals' anger. In addition, we also observed the role of sensitivity to criticism to anger. We hypothesized that perceived criticism would influence anger, also there is corelation between sensitivity to criticism toward anger.

METHOD

Participants

The study applied an experimental approach with a pre-test post-test control group design. In addition, we also observed the explicit behaviour while experienced anger for qualitative data. The participants involved 15 psychology Indonesian undergraduates with age range between 18-20 years old. The study has been registered and approved in Psychology Department, Universitas Negeri Semarang.

Procedure

Subjects were allocated into an experimental group (8 participants) and an control group (7 participants). They were invited individually in the laboratory, after filling out the informed

consent, they were asked to fill the sensitivity to criticism questionnaire to reveal the level of sensitivity to criticism. Then, they were given a task of writing an essay on the use of animals in scientific research. Later, participants in the experiment group were given directional critics relate to their assignment by experimenter but not with participant in the control group (i.e., no critics).

Material and Measure

Criticism. Criticism manipulation was generated by giving the participants a task of writing an essay on the use of animals in scientific research. Then, participants in the experimental group were given direct criticism related their work. The examples of direct criticism were: "your task have no logic argument" or "your essay was poor" etc.

STAXI scale. We used a modified the Ste-Trait Anger Expression inventory (STAXI) by Spielberger et al., (1970s) to measure participants' anger. The STAXI scale has a number of subscales that measure various facets of anger: a) State Anger: Determines the level of anger felt in a certain circumstance or moment. b) Assesses a person's propensity to become angry in a variety of contexts (trait anger).c) Measures the outward manifestation of anger, such as verbal or physical aggressiveness toward other people. d) Analyses the internalization of rage, including concealing or holding back wrath and e) An evaluation of a person's capacity for anger management or control.

Sensitivity to criticism. We applied Sensitivity to Criticism Scale (SCS; Atlas 1994), a 30-item self-report assessment that uses a 7-point Likert scale to evaluate how respondents react to common criticism. The participant is asked to picture themselves in each scenario when a selected partner is making the given comment to them when they are filling out the scale. Each question is asked to the participant twice: first, on a scale of 1 (definitely not a criticism) to 7 (definitely a criticism), indicating how much the statement wounded them, and second, on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal). Cronbach's alpha has been used to measure internal consistency, and it has consistently been shown to be at least .95 (e.g., Atlas, Fassett, & Peterson, 1994).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to determine the effect of giving criticism to anger. Prior to the initial data analysis, the normality test showed that participants' pre-test score in the experimental group was $p = 0.593$ and post-test was $p = 0.807$. While in the control group the participants' pre-test obtained $p = 0.998$ and post-test was $p = 0.995$. This means that all data obtained was normally distributed. Furthermore, from the homogeneity test we noticed that participants' score in the experimental group were 1.307 with $p = 0.275$ and the control group obtained results of 1.587 with $p = 0.232$. It means that the data obtained was homogeneous. Once the normality and the homogeneity were met the requirement, we continued to test the data using the independent sample t-test data analysis technique by comparing the gain scores of the experimental group and the control group. The mean value of the experimental group at the time of the pre-test was 103.7143 while at the time of the post-test the results were 100.2857. Meanwhile, we result showed that there was no significant difference between pre-test and post-test gain score of the participants, $t = 0.586$, $p = 0.569$. Thus, the hypothesis was rejected as there is no effect of giving criticism on increasing anger in the experimental group. The second hypothesis aims to determine the effect of sensitivity to criticism possessed by research subjects on the level of anger experienced. The result of the Pearson correlation between sensitivity to criticism and anger is 0.339 with $p = 0.411$. Hence, it is concluded that there is no effect of sensitivity to criticism on anger because the significance value obtained is greater than $\alpha 0.05$.

The level of sensitivity to criticism for overall participants were moderate. Participants in the experimental group experienced moderate level of anger during the pre-test and post-test, whereas overall participant in the control group experienced moderate anger level at pre-test and slightly decrease from 100% to 71.4% after post-test, it means 28.6% participant in the low anger level. However, the slightly different score of participants' anger level were found between the control group and the experimental group. The anger level was presented into 5 aspects : trait-anger, state-anger, anger-control, anger-out, and anger-in. All these aspects are expressed using the adapted STAXI scale.

We analysed the category of each aspect of anger to check the overall level of the participants' anger before and after intervention. First, the participants trait-anger score in the experimental group was 100% moderately, while at the post-test 12.5% participants experienced high anger, 62.5% moderately, and 25% participants experienced low anger. Furthermore, participants' anger in the control group during the pre-test was recorded at 14% in the high anger, 57% in the moderate anger, and 29% in the low anger. Second, for the state-anger aspect, it was recorded that participants' anger the pre-test the experimental group reach 75% in the moderate anger and 25% in the low anger, while at the post-test it was changes into 50% in the medium and low anger respectively. Meanwhile in the control group, the participants' state-anger aspect during the pre-test was 71% in the medium anger and 29% in the low anger, while during the post-test it was 57% in the moderate anger, and 43% in the low anger. Third, the participants score for the anger-control aspect in the experimental group at the pre-test and post-test stay remained at 62.5% in the high anger and 37.5% in the medium anger. While in the control group for pre-test was 43% in the high anger and 57% in the medium anger, then it increased at the post-test at 71% in the high anger and 29% in the medium anger. Fourth, the participants' score for the anger-out aspect was found at 50% respectively in the medium and low anger for both pre-test and post-test, while in the control group , the pre-test recorded 71% participants experienced moderate anger and 29 % were low anger, whereas in the post-test found that 57% participants experienced moderate anger and 43% felt low anger. Fifth, the participants score for the anger-in aspect in the experimental group was found 25% for high anger and 75% for moderate anger in the pre-test, while in the post-test it changed into 12.5% for high anger and 87.5% for moderate anger. Meanwhile, in the control group yielded 57% for high anger and 43% for moderate anger in the pre-test, while in the post-test found 29% for high anger and 71% for moderate anger.

This study also uses interview and observation methods to improve the understanding the participants' anger by checking their emotion. The results of the interviews and observations are summarized in the table below:

Table 1. Summary of participants' emotion form

Subject	Emotion form		
	Anxiety	Anger	Fear
1	√		
2		√	√
3	√	√	
4	√	√	
5	√	√	√
6		√	
7	√	√	√
8	√		√

The interview result found that 75% participants showed anxiety or anger and 50% experienced fear.

Table 2. Summary of the reasons for not angry

Subject	Emotion form	
	withhold	Experience
1	-	√
2	√	-
3	√	-
4	-	-
5	√	√
6	-	√
7	-	-
8	-	-

From the table we can highlighted that 37.5 % participants did not feel angry because participants withhold the anger and also for the experiences to manage anger (37.5%).

Table 3. Summary of observations result

No	Observation unit	Physical movement	Frequencies	Percentage
1	Hand movements	- Move the fingers - Holding hands - Playing with the object (pen and paper) that is being held	8	100%
2	Foot movements	- Move the feet to the right and to the left - Move the feet forward and backward - Stomping the feet on the floor - Shaking legs	3	37,5%
3	Body movement	- Move the body forward and backward - Move the body to the right and left - Change body position actively - Body leaning back - Bends the body forward	6	75%
4	Eye Contact	- Look down - View to the right and left - Avoid eye contact with the experimenter	8	100%
5	Face expression	- Shows concern - Looks scared - Shows annoyance - The face looks lethargic	4	50%
6	Other movement	- Moving lips - Playing pen in mouth	2	25%

Our hypothesis which states that "there are differences in the level of anger in the experimental group before and after the directional critique treatment" is rejected. This shows that direct criticism has no effect on increasing participants' anger in the experimental group. From the

distribution of anger levels during the pre-test and post-test in the experimental group which remained in the moderate level. In addition, from the t-test obtained $t = 0.586$ with a significance of $p = 0.569$, which means that there is no significant differences of the participants' anger level, which also means that there is no effect of the treatment directional critique to anger.

Our result found that critics not always significantly influence anger. This is not in line with previous study that noticed that criticism is one of factors that contribute anger (Fischer & Evers, 2010). The possible reason why critics might not influence participants anger in the experiment group because the participants might be aware about the manipulation which lead to anger. Hence, participants tend to hold back the anger or other negative emotions. In addition, according to the theory of attribution, people frequently place the blame for events on either internal (such as personality qualities) or external (such as situational variables) causes. Participants may be less prone to get angry when they believe criticism is unfair or unjustified. However, the risk of feeling angry may increase if the criticism is regarded to be relevant and valid (Weiner, 2000).

The other reason why critics did not generate participants anger because most participants might use flight strategy (Harmon-Jones, 2016). From the reinforcement approaches, Harmon-Jones highlighted that negative emotion such as anger would arise if individuals experienced unpleasant event and they choose fight but not flight. The directional critique to participants' essay in the experiment group might generate flight response by avoiding conflict arise while they are angry. This statement was conveyed the interview result that participants tend to hold back the anger they felt when receiving criticism so that anger did not appear.

Furthermore, why participants' anger was not detected can also be explained from cognitive appraisal approaches (Harmon-Jones, 2016), that is the way individuals interpret situations that ultimately lead to emotions. There was no increase in participant's anger after given directional criticism to the group because the participants considered the situation did not need to be responded angrily. Referring to the approach by Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones (2016), participants are able to assess the situation then they prefer to avoid (flight) the conflict or by hold back the anger.

The study finding indicate that criticism has no effect on anger, however the interview found that criticism causes another negative affect such as anxiety. This result contradicts with Fischer & Evers (2010) which says that anger can arise when given negative criticism or evaluation. This study confirmed that criticism might causes anxiety. This finding is in line with research done by Nepon, Flett, Hewitt, & Molnar (2011) who found that giving negative feedback generate individuals' social anxiety. In addition, Gilbert & Miles (2000) also stated that criticism can lead to depression, embarrassment, social anxiety when accompanied by self-blame and anxious rather than angry.

Anxiety due to giving criticism arises because of internal factors. Gilbert et al., (2006) explained that the emergence of negative affect due to giving criticism is caused by three factors: mood (depression and anxiety), internalization (self-blaming), and externalization (blaming-other). Furthermore, Gilbert et al., (2006) explained that internalization is related to the situation of individuals who are at a lower social status. From the interview, we found that participants mood and self-blaming were emerged and led to participants' anxiety when receive criticism.

In addition, research indicates that the emergence of anxiety rather than anger when criticized might also influence by personality factors. Cloninger's psychobiological theory divides personality into two dimensions, namely temperament and character. Temperament refers to emotional responses that are genetically attached to individuals and tend to be stable. While character refers to self-concept and individual differences in values and goals that are influenced by choices, intentions, and meaningful experiences during life (Kasper et al., 2003). In Cloninger's

theory, temperament leads to the trait-anger aspect, while character leads to the anger-control, anger-in, and anger-out aspects. The trait-anger aspect which refers to the emotional disposition possessed by the participants; it appears that participants have a moderate trait-anger which indicates they are not easily provoked by anger. Furthermore, participants' anger-control aspect score mostly in high and medium level, which indicates that they are able to control anger when facing the unpleasant situation. In addition, participants' anger-out or the tendency to express anger that is felt towards other people or the surrounding environment was in the medium and low level, which means when they were in a state of anger, the participants do not vent their feelings on the outside environment, but more deeply (anger-in). Moreover, the participants had tendency of low temperament resulted no effect on the anger when being criticized, also participants' experience and personal values had strengthened the individual character which lower the possibility of anger.

Giving criticism that led to negative affect (i.e., anxiety) rather than anger might be because of cultural factors that are inherent in the individual. Matsumoto & Juang (2013: 209-210) revealed that culture has an important role in shaping individual emotions. The influence of culture on emotions is classified into three forms. First, culture has a role in regulating individual basic emotions. Second, culture plays a role in shaping unique emotional experiences that will become basic emotions. Third, culture shapes unique concepts, meanings, behaviours, values, and beliefs related to emotions. Research by Bresnahan, Shearman, Lee, Ohashi, & Mosher (2002) found that there are differences between American and Chinese and Japanese culture in responding to criticism. One form of response shown American's response to criticism was silence. The silence act in American culture is anger, whereas in Chinese culture silence means having experienced something embarrassing. Indonesia, which has a culture that is almost similar to China's, may have an almost similar form of emotional response. Hence, it is concluded that the emotional response shown by participants was anxiety rather than anger represent the embarrassment feeling when being criticized. Participants have grown in Indonesian culture which upholds harmony has formed emotions in individuals to suppress their emotional feelings. From the interviews, three participants stated explicitly have suppressed the feelings to avoid conflict. Moreover, existing social roles require a younger individual to respect other individuals who are older. This increases the tendency to harbour negative feelings when given directional critique by the experimenter.

Aside of criticism, there was no effect of the sensitivity to criticism on the participants' anger after giving directional criticism manipulation. A Pearson correlation statistical test was 0.339, $p = 0.411$. Participants who were sensitive to criticism do not always easily ignite their anger when faced with an evaluation or criticism. The non-significant result might be because overall participants had a sensitivity to criticism in the medium level. That is, given comments or evaluations did not responded emotionally and they were not easily hurt. These two characteristics of sensitive to criticisms could lead to severe psychological problems, such as depression, mood disorders, narcissism, and schizophrenia (Atlas, 1994; Iqbal, Ahmad, Aleem, & Parveen, 2015; & Natoli, Nelson, Lengu, & Huprich, 2016). Hence, the participants had medium to low level of sensitivity to criticism as they were not detected has psychological problems.

The fact that sensitivity to criticism has no effect on the level of anger contradicts to the findings by Gilbert & Miles (2000) which said that sensitivity to criticism will result in an increase in anger if individuals have a high predisposition to anger. The sensitivity to criticism has no effect on participants' anger because trait-anger in research subjects is in the moderate level. Sensitivity to criticism affects anger if there are internal factors in the subject, namely blaming-other. Gilbert & Miles (2000) revealed that criticism given to individuals will result in anger and aggression if the individual who receives the criticism blames the person giving the criticism.

Research related to sensitivity to criticism have been mostly carried out related to psychological problems. Limited research has been found that specifically examines the relationship between sensitivity to criticism and emotion. Further research is needed to define the relationship between sensitivity to criticism and emotion, whether sensitivity to criticism becomes an emotional tendency or vice versa.

CONCLUSION

The study confirmed there was no change in anger in the experimental group compared to the control group from the results before and after manipulation, which meant that there was no effect whatsoever from giving criticism to the participants' anger. In-depth interview and observation methods found that participants experienced some negative emotions after given direct criticism, such as anxiety, anger, and fear. The majority of participants were more likely to experience anxiety rather than anger because they tend to hold anger. Future researchers are expected to control over the factors that influence giving critical treatment of anger. In addition, we recommend using a behavioural measurement such as blood pressure test to get objective measurement of anger from biopsychological perspectives.

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