Don't Make Me Angry: You Wouldn't Like Me When I'm Angry

A review of the film

The Upside of Anger

(2005)

Mike Binder (Director)

Reviewed by

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This film is a very well-made family drama. But I have a confession to make—family drama is not my preferred genre. I originally watched the film because my wife had seen it in the theater with a friend and she wanted the two of us to watch it on DVD. As someone who usually prefers the action–adventure and science fiction genres, I was surprised to find myself highly absorbed and transported by the film (Green & Brock, 2002). In addition, as a social psychologist, I found this to be a nice demonstration of the impact of affect in our lives, especially in how emotions and the dynamics of our close relationships play out.
Narrative of an Angry Woman

Most people will admit that emotion is an important determinant of behavior. Psychologists have studied the role of emotion in persuasion and consumer behavior (E. M. Clark, Brock, & Stewart, 1994; Clore & Schnall, 2005), life span development (Klaus & Kennell, 1976; Lewis & Lin, 1996), and information processing (M. S. Clark & Fiske, 1982). Social psychologists often remark that reality does not matter, that it is the perception of reality that is important—misinformation and misunderstandings can make us just as angry as the truth. One interesting side note is that I found the general theme of this film somewhat similar to another recent film—*Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Grant, 2005). *The Upside of Anger* shows how affect, even misattributed affect, can influence our perceptions and how we may, in turn, influence the lives of others. The film follows a mother, Terry (Joan Allen), and her four daughters over three years, starting immediately after Terry's husband has apparently run off with another woman. The youngest daughter narrates the film and informs the viewer that her mother transitioned from being “the nicest person on earth” to a very angry and bitter woman. Terry and her daughters are very angry and must cope with this new life, including learning to readjust to each other's emotions and life changes. The additional variable in this equation is Denny (Kevin Costner), who becomes Terry's drinking buddy and, it is not surprising, eventual love interest. Denny is a lonely, somewhat sad neighbor, former baseball star, and disc jockey on a local talk radio show who brings his own problems to the relationship, including alcohol abuse. He is more than willing to sell autographed baseballs but unwilling to discuss his baseball career.

The film shows the influence of Terry's anger, which is evident in her perceptions, behavior, and interactions with her family. Although she is under a tremendous amount of stress, her coping skills are not quite up to the task (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). She spends much of her time watching TV, abusing alcohol, and arguing with her daughters. At one point she goes around the house and removes all of the pictures of her husband. For much of the film, Terry uses alcohol to cope with particularly stressful situations (e.g., finding out her college-graduated daughter is pregnant and about to marry a man Terry has never met).

At first Denny does not help much in becoming her drinking buddy—although she has some companionship and social support, it is not always the kind that helps her overcome her obstacles. Terry's anger and drinking drive a gap between her and her daughters.
Conflict Resolution in Relationships

After her husband's disappearance, Terry finds herself in conflict with everyone in her social network. Terry and Denny argue about the nature of their relationship. Terry and her daughters argue about the daughters' life choices. Terry's interactions with her daughters seem to fit the demand–withdraw cycle (Christensen & Heavey, 1993). Terry nags, and the daughters withdraw. Consistent with the model, each sees the other as the problem—Terry nags because she sees her daughters withdrawing, and her daughters withdraw because of Terry's nagging. As the film progresses, Terry decreases her nagging (demand), and the daughters do not withdraw as much. This results, very slowly, in some mutual understanding between mother and children.

The conflicts between Terry and Denny are more complicated. The two start their relationship because Denny admits (after Terry voices her suspicion) that he has always been attracted to her, and she realizes that she needs some type of companionship, even if it is only based on one thing—the consumption of alcohol. However, underlying the alcohol abuse is Denny's true desire to be part of a family, and he gets that feeling as he starts to eat dinner and spend more time with the family as a whole. He also has a difficult time going from loner bachelor to being part of a family in which he is the only man. Unlike her relationship with her daughters, Terry does not demand (nag) with Denny, but, at first, she tries to drive him away; in this case, Terry is withdrawing and Denny is demanding. The other major conflict occurs when Denny, in trying to do something nice for the family, gets one daughter a job at his radio station. Terry is furious, and the situation worsens when her daughter starts dating her older supervisor (who is also Denny's producer). Denny's attempt to resolve the conflict makes matters worse. The complications continue when Terry offers Denny sex (demand) and Denny backs out (withdraw).

A final aspect of the conflict nicely illustrates the accommodation model (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovic, & Lipkus, 1991). Denny notes that he has been very tolerant of Terry's behavior because he knows that she is in pain, a response that Rusbult et al. would characterize as loyalty—passively waiting for the relationship to improve. Denny also exhibits some very active attempts to help their relationship survive and thrive (e.g., helping her daughter find a job), which Rusbult et al. would characterize as voice.

Denny, Terry, and the Investment Model

According to Rusbult, Drigotis, and Verette's (1994) investment model, higher satisfaction or happiness in a relationship is a function of increased rewards and lower costs. However, higher commitment to a relationship (wanting the relationship to last) is a function of higher
satisfaction, higher investment in the relationship (how much one has put in and is at risk to lose if the relationship ends), and fewer alternatives to the relationship (e.g., work, spending time with friends, other potential romantic partners). Denny and Terry become more and more invested in their relationship. At first they have only alcohol in common. Then they start to rely on each other for companionship and emotional support. Denny starts relying on Terry and her daughters to decrease his own loneliness and sadness and satisfy his desire to belong to a family and to have people he can trust—people who do not want to exploit him because he was a baseball star. In addition, the daughters start to rely on Denny as a father figure. Rewards, investments, and subsequent satisfaction increase for both, and costs decline. It is interesting that the issue of perceived alternatives (e.g., other potential dating partners) never seems to be important for either Denny or Terry.

**Relationship Maintenance**

Recently, researchers in psychology and communications have identified strategies that people use to maintain or enhance their relationships, whether friendships or romantic relationships. These strategies include being positive, supportive, and open and engaging in shared activities (Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Oswald & Clark, 2003; Oswald, Clark, & Kelly, 2004). Denny does a good job of using these strategies to maintain his relationship with Terry and her family. He always tries to put the best spin on the daughters’ behaviors (positive), he tries to help one daughter find a job, he gives Terry an outlet for her frustrations, he engages the daughters in conversation about their problems (supportive), he has dinner with them, and he accompanies them on family outings (shared activities). He does only a mediocre job at being open, as he stays very closed about his baseball career.

**The Human Adventure Is Just Beginning**

The end of the film makes it clear that the anger Terry and her daughters felt was misattributed. The film concludes with the youngest daughter, the budding writer and director, providing a nice bit of psychological insight—that anger and resentment can stop us in our tracks, that feelings are very real even when they are not very accurate, and that they can change us into something we are not. However, if we have supportive people in our network who can help us resolve conflicts and cope in healthy and effective ways, then the upside of anger is the better person we become. We should not be afraid of this journey nor of the undiscovered country to which it leads.
References


Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2002). Transportation-imagery model of narrative communication. In M. C. Green, J. J. Strange, & T. C. Brock (Eds.), *Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations* (pp. 315–341). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.


