



# An examination of the relationship between anger and suicide risk through the lens of the interpersonal theory of suicide



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## ABSTRACT

Research has implicated a relationship between anger and suicidality, though underlying mechanisms remain unclear. The current study examined this relationship through the lens of the interpersonal theory of suicide (ITS). According to the ITS, individuals who experience thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and elevated acquired capability for suicide are at increased risk for death by suicide. The relationships between anger and these variables were examined and these variables were examined as potential mediators between anger and suicidal ideation and behavior. Additionally, exposure to painful and provocative events was examined as a potential mediator between anger and acquired capability. As part of intake at a community mental health clinic, 215 outpatients completed questionnaires assessing depression, suicidal ideation, anger, perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and acquired capability. Regression analyses revealed unique relationships between anger and both thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, covarying for depression. The association between anger and acquired capability trended toward significance. The links between anger and suicidal ideation and behavior were fully mediated by thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, but this effect was driven by perceived burdensomeness. Additionally, the link between anger and acquired capability was fully mediated by experience with painful and provocative events. In conclusion, results suggest that anger is uniquely associated with perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. Anger is associated with suicidal ideation and behavior via perceived burdensomeness and with greater acquired capability for suicide via experiences with painful and provocative events. Treatment for problematic anger may be beneficial to decrease risk for suicide.

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## 1. Background and objectives

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009); however, it has received relatively little research attention as compared to other psychological phenomena and there are few effective interventions for reducing suicide risk (Van Orden et al., 2010). Thus, further research is imperative to better understand the risk factors associated with suicide and the potential mechanisms by which risk factors lead to suicidal behavior.

Several studies have identified a relationship between anger and risk for suicide. Studies of psychiatric inpatients have demonstrated that higher levels of anger are uniquely associated with higher

levels of suicide risk (Horesh et al., 1997) and distinguish suicidal psychiatric inpatients from nonsuicidal inpatients (Kotler et al., 1993). Furthermore, a qualitative investigation of inpatients that died by suicide reported that many expressed notable levels of anger towards others prior to their death and that this anger was as obvious as their symptoms of depression (Morgan and Priest, 1984). Additionally, multiple psychiatric disorders that include anger as a symptom (e.g., borderline personality disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder) are consistently associated with heightened suicide risk (Nepon et al., 2010; Nock et al., 2010).

Constructs related to anger, such as aggression and hostility, have also been linked to suicide risk. Aggression has been associated with suicide risk in multiple studies (Angst and Clayton, 1986, 1998; Berglund, 1984; Shaffer et al., 1996) and history of aggression has been found to be associated with death by suicide among men with depression (Dumais et al., 2005). In a Finnish record-based study, greater hostility was prospectively predictive of suicidal behavior and death among men (Romanov et al., 1994).

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Additionally, a study of women found that greater hostility distinguished suicide attempters from a depressed control group (Weissman et al., 1973).

A recent study further examined the relationship between suicidality and problems of anger experience and expression in a large representative sample of adults and found that anger experience and expression uniquely predicted suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts, even after controlling for demographics and psychiatric comorbidity (Hawkins and Cogle, 2013). Further, among individuals reporting lifetime suicidal ideation, anger experience and expression were unique predictors of suicide attempts. Anger experience and expression also demonstrated independent and additive effects on risk of suicide.

It is currently unclear how anger may increase risk of suicide, though recent theoretical approaches to suicide may help explain the relationship. The interpersonal theory of suicide (ITS; Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010) is one approach that has garnered significant research attention. According to this theory, three variables must be present for an individual to make a lethal or near-lethal suicide attempt: thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and the acquired capability for suicide. The perception that one is a burden to others (perceived burdensomeness) and the lack of connection with others (thwarted belongingness) experienced simultaneously result in the desire for death. However, a desire for death is not sufficient for death by suicide. The theory posits that in order for an individual to make a lethal suicide attempt, he or she must habituate to the fear and pain involved with such an attempt. Individuals acquire the capability to withstand the fear and pain involved in lethal self-injury by repeatedly engaging in painful and provocative experiences, such as non-suicidal self-injury, and exposure to violence or aggression.

A number of studies have offered empirical support for the ITS. Van Orden et al. (2008) found that thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness were associated with suicidal ideation individually, and that they interacted with each other so that at high levels of both variables, suicidal desire was significantly increased. Next, they found that exposure to painful and provocative events predicted acquired capability and that greater levels of acquired capability were associated with greater numbers of past suicide attempts. Lastly, they found that acquired capability and perceived burdensomeness interacted to predict clinician-rated risk for suicidal behavior. Additionally, Joiner et al. (2009) found that, above and beyond depression and other demographic covariates, a three-way interaction between thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capability predicted the presence of a recent suicide attempt (vs. ideation) among a sample of suicidal adults, with high levels on all three variables conferring the highest risk.

When viewed through the lens of the ITS, it is possible that problematic anger and its consequences contribute to greater perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. Individuals with high levels of anger are prone to experience regular interpersonal conflict and relationship problems (Baron et al., 2007; Miller et al., 1995; Tafate et al., 2002). Not only are angry individuals more likely to engage in disagreements and arguments, but they are likely to experience greater negative outcomes as a result of these episodes. One study comparing adults with high and low levels of trait anger found that following an interpersonal argument, individuals with high trait anger reported higher levels of depression, disgust, foolishness, and shame than those with low trait anger (Tafate et al., 2002). This study also found that, whereas individuals with low trait anger reported that their disagreements had little impact on their relationships, individuals with high trait anger experienced greater damage to their relationships following disagreements. Thus, frequent interpersonal conflict may lead

individuals with high trait anger to feel more ashamed of their behavior and increase their perceptions that they are a burden to others and that they do not belong.

Individuals with high trait anger may experience thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness due to a tendency to make poor decisions that may negatively affect their relationships. Individuals high in trait anger were more likely than those low in trait anger to aggress against their partner during the Wartime Prisoner's Dilemma game, despite the fact that cooperation with their partner would have resulted in fewer losses (Kassinove et al., 2002). This finding suggests that problematic anger contributes to self-defeating outcomes in social interactions (e.g., relationship break-ups and divorce). Additionally, some individuals with high levels of trait anger may cope with their anger by avoiding certain situations or individuals, which could contribute to a lack of connection with others (Hogan and Linden, 2004). Taken together, these findings suggest that chronic relationship conflicts may lead to decreased social support and greater social isolation, which may contribute to greater perceived burdensomeness and a failed sense of belonging, thus increasing risk for suicide.

According to the ITS, exposure to painful and provocative events increases one's acquired capability for suicide. Individuals with problematic anger may be at increased risk for suicide because of their tendency to engage in impulsive and risky behaviors, which may increase their acquired capability. Many studies have found that anger is associated with violent or aggressive behavior (Cornell et al., 1999; Tafate et al., 2002; Wilkowski and Robinson, 2008), substance abuse (Deffenbacher, 1993; Walfish et al., 1990), and self-injury (Soloff et al., 1994). Additionally, a study of motor vehicle drivers found that high anger was associated with more aggressive and risky driving behaviors as well as an increase in minor accidents (Deffenbacher et al., 2000).

The current study sought to examine the relationship between anger and suicide risk through the lens of the ITS. Specifically, we tested whether anger was uniquely related to perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and acquired capability for suicide, when covarying for depression. All analyses covaried for depression in order to rule out depressive symptoms as a confounding variable, due to its established relationship with anger (Pasquini et al., 2004) and suicide (Minkoff et al., 1973). Next, we examined whether perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness mediated the relationship between anger and suicidal ideation. To this end, outpatients at a community mental health clinic completed questionnaires regarding their current symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation as well as their levels of anger, perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belonging, and acquired capability. We predicted that anger would be uniquely related to perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and acquired capability. Furthermore, we predicted that anger would have an indirect effect on suicidal ideation and that this relationship would be mediated by perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belonging. We also predicted that anger would have an indirect effect on suicidal behavior (past suicide attempts), which would be mediated by perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belonging, and acquired capability. Additionally, we predicted that the relationship between higher levels of anger and increased acquired capability for suicide would be mediated by exposure to painful and provocative life events.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants and setting

The sample consisted of 215 outpatients seeking services at a university-affiliated community mental health center in the

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