Almost everyone agrees that our society has problems with anger. We often say that we have “too much aggression, violence, or hatred.” While this certainly seems true, several questions can be raised about the postulate, particularly the basic thinking which leads to the quantitative term, “too much.”

In contrast, I would first like to suggest that we suffer from constraints which prevent us from expressing anger and even from knowing when we are experiencing anger—constraints which are different for members of each sex.

Second, even as the expression of anger is constrained, I believe that we live in a milieu which continuously produces anger—at the societal level and during the course of individual psychological development—for both sexes, but differently for each.

Third, there is a possibility that the very conditions which produce so much anger grow out of the reality that the expression of anger has been encouraged differentially—predominantly for one sex only.

Fourth, if the first three issues are valid, they may have influenced our very conception of what anger is and how it originates.

I shall begin this discussion with some observations on women’s experience, then move to a few notions about parts of men’s experience. Finally, I will return to reconsider these initial issues.

It is important to define the term, anger, because there has been great variation in its usage. The topic has been studied by many workers in several disciplinary traditions (Miller et al., 1981). To sort the complicated lexicography, however, would take several papers in itself; as an alternative, I should like to formulate provisional definitions at the end of this lecture. For the moment, let us start with the word anger and go along with whatever that word means to each of us.
Women and anger

In speaking about this subject, there is an immediate problem: One topic most people really don’t want to hear about is women’s anger! Our culture (and others) has a long history of surrounding this topic with dread and denial. Within psychological fields, there has been frequent use of such terms as “castrating women” and the like, but it is hard to locate any place at which women’s anger enters as a “proper” phenomenon. It is virtually always pathological.

Perhaps a description of a real person, whom I’ll call Anita, will help to make this more concrete: Anita was a married woman in her 50s who had spent her adult life contributing as well as she could to the growth and development of her husband and four children. At her first therapy visit, she was depressed, and she cried almost continuously as she told of how inadequate and worthless she felt. She conveyed subtle hints of anger as well as clues that she was probably quite critical of several people, particularly her husband; but overtly she criticized only herself. At the same time, she clearly looked to her husband to provide affirmation and validation of her worth—and this is true for many women, even today.

In the past, I might have seen her anger as repressed and unreasonable, hence an indication of “pathology.” Probably, too, I would have seen her as a woman who was “dependent” on her husband and therefore had problems with excess “dependency.” I could have cited her need for her husband’s affirmation as further evidence of her “poor sense of self.” And all of this would have added up rapidly to a common diagnostic picture.

In a well-intentioned attempt to relieve Anita’s depression, I might have thought it important to help her see her anger and its irrationality.

I believe now that such a course is wrong, but that belief follows from a reexamination of women’s anger.

We live in an androcentric (male-centered) society—that is, one which is organized in terms of the experience of men as they have been able to define it and elaborate on it. This elaboration is called “culture” and “knowledge.” The society also is largely patriarchal, in that men (of a certain group) have held all of the legitimate leadership, power, and authority. But even if one does not feel familiar with all of the connotations of the word patriarchy, one can think of the conditions set in motion in any set of relationships which are structured so that one group is dominant and another is subordinate, whether the relationship is based on sex, class, race, or other characteristics. All historical evidence indicates that once a group is constituted as a dominant group, it behaves in predictable ways. Some of these are:

- It tends to act destructively to subordinate groups.
- It restricts the subordinate group’s range of actions—and even reactions to destructive treatment.
- It does not encourage subordinates’ full and free expression of their experience.
- It characterizes subordinates falsely.
- It describes this as the normal situation—usually the “natural” situation, ordered and ordained by higher and better powers, ranging from God to “biology.”

Subordinates usually are dependent on dominants economically, socially, and politically. Their experience and views are excluded from the culture and do not form the base for the construction of what is called “knowledge.”

Obviously, any subordinate is in a position which constantly generates anger. Yet this is one of the emotions that no dominant group ever wants to allow in subordinates. (No industrialist ever wanted the workers to be angry; no empire builder ever wanted the “natives to be restless.”) Although the direct reasons for fear of subordinates’ anger may seem obvious, this fear can become magnified in an intricate fashion in the minds of dominants. In addition, the suppression of anger is reinforced psychologically in the minds of the subordinates in many ways. I’ll review just a few:

First, direct force has to be obviously available, even if it only lurks quietly in the background. For example, in this society only recently have we become more fully aware of the threat of physical violence which has always been exerted against women; but many women have known the private experience of beatings, rape, and other forms of brutality—or the threats of such force. The threat of social and economic deprivation also is a form of force, and, in general, men have controlled such resources.

Second, it is usually made to appear that subordinates have no cause for anger; if they feel anything like it, there is something wrong with them. They are uncivilized natives, dumb workers, sinful or unloved women—or, in modern parlance, “sick,” maladjusted, and the like.

Growing up then, within the admonition to be “normal”—that is, to comply with the requirements of the situation—subordinates often develop several more complex psychological tendencies. These complicated characteristics often rest on a variation of some of the following inner beliefs:

1. I am weak. This can effectively stamp out hints of anger near their start, because to feel angry can produce immediate fear of overpowering retal-