The Surprising Power of Sadness in Workplace Conflict: When Vulnerability Outperforms Dominance

Peter Aungle
Psychology Department
Harvard University

Yushi Zhang
School of Public Health
Yale University

Viknesh Nagarathinam
[Affiliation]

Jacques Paradis
Pitzer College

Daniel Chen
School of Economics
Toulouse University

Abstract

Negative emotions are common at work, yet many people fear expressing them. Across two studies, we tested how expressing anger, sadness, or no emotion in workplace conflict influences perceptions of agency, effectiveness, likability, appropriateness, and status. Contrary to traditional emotion theories predicting that high-agency emotions like anger drive effectiveness while low-agency emotions like sadness signal weakness, our findings reveal that sadness can be nearly as effective as anger while preserving relational warmth and appropriateness. Derived from the Predicted Behavior Change mean for Sadness 6 (6.64) divided by Anger 1 (8.48), adjusted for the baseline of no response (4.08), sadness achieves 89% of anger's perceived effectiveness, yet fosters greater likability and interpersonal cohesion. Not responding to conflict, no matter the rationale, was consistently viewed significantly less favorably on all measures except likability.

These results suggest that, when expressed mindfully, negative emotions can be effective and likeable regardless of gender, and authentic emotional expression, when contextually appropriate, can serve under-explored conflict resolution functions, reflecting an evolving cultural understanding of emotion: authenticity, more so than dominance, defines strength.

INTRODUCTION

Emotion expressions significantly shape workplace conflicts and interpersonal relationships. They project judgement (Cheshin, 2020; Van Kleef, 2008), signal meaning that others use to interpret intentions and competence (Van Kleef,, & Côté, S. 2018), and shape whether a conflict escalates or resolves (Kalter et al., 2021). In many organizational cultures, however, negative emotion expressions like anger and sadness are perceived as inappropriate or counterproductive (Cheshin, 2020). A common worry is that expressing them will be perceived as unprofessional, leading many to remain silent even in moments of conflict, but is this worry justified?

This study addresses this question directly. We examine how two of the most common emotions, anger and sadness, shape interpersonal evaluations dealing with conflicts: when a coworker fails to do their fair share, do observers view it as better to express anger, sadness, or no emotional response at all? Does gender shape these considerations? Does the form of anger or sadness matter as much as the emotion itself?

Traditional emotion theories view emotions as adaptive action tendencies. *Action Readiness Theory* (Frijda, 1986) described emotions as signals preparing the mind and body for particular responses to the environment: anger mobilizes approach and control, whereas sadness elicits withdrawal and reflection. In the workplace, however, these same tendencies carry social implications. Anger, associated with dominance (e.g., Tiedens et al., 2000), may signal leadership agency or higher status; sadness, associated with loss and vulnerability, may link to lower status or dependence (e.g., Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). These interpretations have anchored decades of psychology and organizational research, showing connections between anger and agency, and sadness and subordination (Lazarus, 1991; Weiner, 1985; Bandura, 1977), This work supports a widely held assumption that this research seeks to question: high-agency emotions like anger lead to greater perceived competence, effectiveness, influence, power, and status, while low-agency emotions like sadness lead to lower perceived competence, effectiveness, influence, power, and status.

At the same time, researchers increasingly argue that the meaning of emotional expressions depends on social context and cultural norms (e.g., Barrett, 2017). Attribution theory

argues that observers infer controllability and competence from anger, and helplessness from sadness (Weiner, 1985). Social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) posits that emotional expressions and emotion-motivated behaviors are observed and learned from the social environment, and much of this learning happens vicariously: we learn which emotions are appropriate to express by observing the consequences of others' expressions and emotional displays. As a result, evaluations of emotions are not solely dependent on internal states, but socially learned interpretations shaped by cultural exemplars and shared norms.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) formalized the idea and articulated the foundational framework that culture shapes how the self is construed, arguing that Western cultural contexts tend to promote an independent self defined by internal traits, preferences, and personal agency, whereas many non-Western contexts emphasize an interdependent self defined through relationships, roles, and social obligations. Mesquita et al. (2016) expanded on this idea and emphasized that emotions are not universal entities but are shaped, regulated, and even "made" by participation in specific cultural practices and interactions: cultural environments teach not only what to feel, but when and how to express those feelings, effectively co-constructing emotional reality within each community. Extending this insight into the world of work, researchers have shown that organizations develop shared emotional norms, display rules, and emotional climates which form part of the emotional "vocabulary" of the workplace (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). A multilevel analysis of emotional labor among nurses (Diefendorff et al., 2011) shows that within hospital units, there are unit-level shared beliefs about what emotions are appropriate and these shared norms relate to job satisfaction and burnout. Their work shows that workplace emotional environments become structured through both interpersonal and intergroup dynamics, shaping employee well-being and organizational health.

Over the years, scholars have increasingly questioned the assumption that expressing negative emotions is universally harmful; when expressed authentically, sadness may signal integrity and emotional intelligence—qualities now increasingly valued in professional life, especially compared to suppressing emotions, which leads to lower social support, less closeness to others, and lower social satisfaction (Srivastava et al., 2009). These findings raise the possibility that emotional silence, often chosen to convey professionalism, may actually carry its own interpersonal costs.

Van Kleef's Emotions as Social Information (EASI) model (2009) offers a framework to understand these dynamics. The model proposes that emotions influence others through inferential and affective pathways: Observers draw inferences about the expresser's intentions, and experience affective reactions. Anger usually triggers dominance inferences and defensive affect, whereas sadness triggers communal inferences and empathetic affect. When the emotion is appropriate to the situation's context, it benefits the expresser – an important point underlying the basis for this research. Appropriateness, in turn, is culturally defined. The EASI model thus bridges functional and cultural theories, and shows that emotions are communicative acts.

Previous research demonstrated that expressing anger can signal a higher status, lead the expresser to garner greater concessions in negotiations (Tiedens et al., 2000; Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006; Steinel et al., 2008; Van Kleef, 2010; Filipowicz et al., 2011), and even help the expresser develop more social ties (Callister al., 2017). Moreover, people facing confrontational tasks perform better if primed to experience anger (Tamir et al., 2008). Tiedens (2001) also pointed out that while anger confers higher perceived status, sadness conveys submission. Expressing anger often causes individuals to be seen as more dominant and tough (Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006), which translates into tangible benefits in interpersonal and professional settings, like negotiations. Sadness, on the other hand, is typically seen as a negative emotion that results from "blaming" situations rather than others and can cause the expresser to be perceived as weaker and more submissive (Tiedens, 2001).

Research has shown that expressions of sadness can signal openness and relational need rather than just weakness, however. For example, in dyadic experiments, participants primed with sadness elicited increased engagement and physiological synchrony from their partners, which suggests that sadness can function to invite connection, especially in men (Rosario et al., 2025). Past research also indicates that anger is often perceived as less warm, less likable, and more socially distant (Van't Riet et al., 2018). Unlike sadness, which can elicit support or sympathy, anger is more likely to generate defensive or avoidant reactions (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Tiedens, 2001; Clark & Taraban, 1991).

Furthermore, past research suggests that gender dynamics often play a decisive role in shaping how emotional expressions are perceived in workplace conflict. In a job interview study modeled after Tiedens (2001), Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) found that men who expressed anger were conferred significantly higher status than women who expressed the same anger.

Women who displayed sadness, on the other hand, were conferred higher status and perceived as more competent than women who displayed anger, suggesting that gender-based emotion stereotypes may influence how emotion expressions are perceived. Agentic women, especially in masculine-typed roles, often elicit moral outrage (Brescoll, Okimoto, & Vial, 2018) and are more likely to be perceived as less likable than similarly agentic men (Heilman et al., 2004). These patterns are consistent with the idea that expressions of dominance violate prescriptive gender norms for women, particularly when such expressions are intense or confrontational.

Most of these studies, however, have focused on women in leadership positions (Heilman, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002), so questions remain about whether similar backlash occurs at lower levels of the workplace hierarchy. If agentic behaviors are essential to advance in organizations (Judge et al., 2002), even when women face contextual barriers that moderate the reward for such behaviors (Ely et al., 2011), the key question becomes *when and under what conditions* expressions of agency begin to yield divergent consequences for men and women. Recent work by Krauth et al. (2025) offers a dynamic lens that women leaders can reconcile agency–communality tensions through a paradox mindset, which utilizes the ability to hold both agentic and communal self-concepts simultaneously. Their findings indicate that when organizational cultures foster learning and openness, women are better able to integrate these competing role expectations, enhancing both confidence and leadership effectiveness.

Moreover, contemporary workplace discourses increasingly encourage empathy, inclusion, and emotional intelligence, "soft skills" once dismissed as "feminine" or low agency. More recent research on leadership perception (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Rosette & Tost, 2010) showed that agentic women can be viewed as both competent and warm, when authenticity moderates expression. Parallelly, men's expressions of sadness, which were once stigmatized, are now interpreted as signs of humility and trustworthiness, though such positive perceptions are highly context-dependent and not universal across fields (Cheshin, 2020). This contextual contingency is now. As Suh et al., (2004) demonstrated, gender differences in agentic and communal behavior are strongly moderated by situational context, such that stereotypically "masculine" or "feminine" patterns emerge in same-sex interactions but attenuate, or even reverse, in cross-sex and romantic relationships. In summary, the cultural coding of gendered emotion is shifting, yet context still matters.

This shift invites reconsiderations of the emotional architecture of power. Our premise is that the social meaning of these signals has changed: observers now evaluate emotions less by their dominance and more by their relational fit. Emotional authenticity and contextual appropriateness, rather than inherent features such as gender alone, may determine social reward.

Researchers suggest that such shifts happen through social learning (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Hamedani et al., 2024). As organizations and generations rethink emotional norms, beliefs about what it means to "act professional" evolve. Older generations, socialized in hierarchical and male-dominant workplaces, may still infer competence from dominance, while younger generations may see emotional expressions as information, evaluating their effectiveness in terms of authenticity and contextual appropriateness.

The form of an emotion expression also affects its impact. According to the EASI model (van Kleef, 2009), people's emotional displays send social signals via both affective reactions and inferential processing. Anger and sadness can manifest in a variety of forms, depending on the individual and the context. Some people express these emotions through overt outbursts, others adopt a more passive-aggressive stance, and some avoid expressing their emotions altogether by disengaging or withdrawing. Tiedens (2001) found that individuals described as angry (vs. sad) were ascribed higher status. Gibson et al (2009) shows that moderate expressions of anger (especially word-based rather than physical gestures) can lead to positive individual and relational outcomes, but high intensity expressions often backfire. Calm, behavior-focused anger, rather than intense, person-directed hostility, can increase perceptions of agency and status without incurring significant interpersonal costs (Averill, 1983).

Similarly, sadness has a nuanced pattern: mild, more controlled sadness evokes sympathy and support (van Doorn et al., 2015), while uncontrolled displays can be perceived as unprofessional or manipulative, especially in high-stakes settings (Cheshin, 2020). It follows that in a workplace conflict scenario we must pay attention not only to which emotion is expressed, but how it is expressed (tone, intensity, direction), who expresses it and to whom, and what the organizational and relational norms are.

This research examines how different forms of anger, sadness, and no-response influence interpersonal outcomes (agency, effectiveness, likeability, appropriateness, status) in a prototypical kind of coworker conflict: perceiving your coworker to be doing less than their fair

share. We also test whether the gender of the expresser moderates these effects, and we present an exploratory analysis of gender-stereotyped evaluations of anger and sadness.

Experimental Design Across a pilot study and two experiments, we examine how anger, sadness, and no response influence evaluations of effectiveness, predicted behavior change, agency, appropriateness, likeability, and status in workplace conflict. We chose to focus on coworker conflict primarily because relationships with coworkers are important components of successful careers (Raabe & Beehr, 2003; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008); conflict between coworkers is extremely common around the world (Kazemi, 2022; Farhadloo, 2024); and, to our knowledge, this is the first study to address this question experimentally.

The pilot study asked participants to assess one of two vignettes, both of which portrayed conflict between coworkers, in terms of how serious and common the depicted conflict is and what emotion would be most likely and appropriate. Since both vignettes met our study criteria on these measures, we chose the Vignette that appeared to have higher ecological validity. Participants rated the conflict as both realistic and common, supporting the ecological validity of the scenario (see Pilot Study, Appendix)

Using vignettes to study the social consequences of emotion expressions allowed us to systematically manipulate the emotion expressed, the intensity, and the gender of the expresser while holding all other details constant. This method enhanced experimental control and enabled precise comparisons of how different emotional responses were perceived.

In the studies that follow, we address these trade-offs by carefully designing conflict scenarios that reflect plausible workplace dynamics and by varying the form of emotional expression across conditions. This approach allows us to isolate the effects of expression style and gender on key interpersonal outcomes, such as perceived likability, competence, warmth, and status, while maintaining experimental control.

Study 1 establishes baseline perceptions of nine distinct responses without specifying the expresser's gender. We paired the vignette selected from the pilot study with nine possible responses—three for each of the categories of anger, sadness, and no response—to test how different kinds of responses were perceived. Study 1 was designed to assess how expressions of anger and sadness affect outcomes relative to choosing not to respond, an option many

employees tend to choose when facing workplace conflict (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009).

Study 2 tests whether gender moderates these effects and whether generational differences signal changing social norms around gender and emotion expression. The names of Analysts A and B in Study 1 were changed to "Alex" and "Brian," and gender was manipulated by changing the pronouns that referred to Alex in the vignette and survey questions (see Appendix 3). This design allowed for a controlled test of the hypothesis that women who express anger to address workplace conflict — especially in a stereotypically masculine domain like investment banking — would be perceived as agentic and likable as men who do so.

STUDY 1

The Surprising Power of Authentic Expressions

Study 1 was designed to test different forms of anger and sadness across multiple outcome measures used to gauge their interpersonal consequences. Our goal was to evaluate how different forms of emotion expression shape perceptions and to establish a baseline for evaluating the effects of gender explored in Study 2.

Study 1 tested 9 responses (3 anger, 3 sadness, 3 no response) to a serious and common form of coworker conflict: feeling like your coworker isn't doing their fair share. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 9 conditions and presented with a vignette describing the conflict as well as one of the 9 responses. After reading the vignette and Analyst A's response, participants were asked to rate how angry and sad they thought Analyst A was, how appropriate, effective, agentic, and likable they thought Analyst A's response was, and how likely they thought it was that Analyst B would change their behavior in the future. The responses within each emotion category varied in tone and intensity, allowing us to study differences within each emotion category as well as differences between categories. Within each emotion category, different forms of expression tended

to yield different results. These differences were most pronounced for anger, more modest for sadness, and negligible for no response.

The 9 responses were as follows:

Anger

1 ***Analyst A feels angry and tells Analyst B that this behavior is not acceptable. Analyst A tells Analyst B that they are part of a team and team members cannot behave like this. Analyst A emphasizes they want to have a good relationship with Analyst B but also makes it clear that they will not tolerate this behavior in the future.***

2 *Analyst A feels angry and yells at Analyst B for not doing their fair share. Analyst A tells Analyst B that they are an irresponsible person and any other member of the team would have done their part. Analyst A threatens to tell their boss if it happens again.*

3 *Analyst A feels angry and decides to stop talking to Analyst B. Analyst A gives Analyst B dirty looks when they cross paths and ignores Analyst B's attempts to talk.*

The social consequences of expressing anger vary depending on qualities such as tone, intensity, and directness (Tiedens, 2001), so we created 3 responses that varied along those dimensions. We modeled *Anger 1* on studies that indicate expressing anger in a calm and behavior-focused manner — rather than with intense, person-directed hostility — increases perceptions of status without incurring significant interpersonal costs (Van Kleef, 2016; Averill, 1983). Thus, in *Anger 1*, Analyst A calmly "tells" Analyst B, while in *Anger 2*, Analyst A intensely "yells at" Analyst B. Furthermore, in *Anger 1*, Analyst A states that they want a good relationship with Analyst B, but their *behavior* is not acceptable. In *Anger 2*, Analyst A makes a *personal* attack on Analyst B by calling them irresponsible. *Anger 1* contrasts the calm and behavior-directed approach with the intense person-directed approach depicted in *Anger 2*. *Anger 3* highlights the passive

aggressive approach: Analyst A vents their anger passive-aggressively rather than directly confronting the situation.

Sadness

4 *Analyst A tells Analyst B that they felt sad being left to do all of the work. Analyst A says they thought they were in this together and that Analyst B's behavior made them feel like Analyst B doesn't care about them or their feelings.*

5 *Feeling exhausted and let down, Analyst A tells Analyst B that they felt sad being left to do all of the work. Clearly holding back tears, Analyst A says they don't think it was fair for them to have to do the entire assignment.*

6 ***Analyst A tells Analyst B that they felt saddened and disheartened by Analyst B's behavior. They are part of a team and are in this together. Analyst A says staying up all night made them feel miserable.***

We modeled our expressions of sadness around the idea that low-intensity, context-appropriate expressions of sadness can lead to greater trust, while high-intensity displays are often perceived as inappropriate and result in decreased support (van Kleef, 2009, 2010; Côté & Hideg, 2011). We chose these 3 sadness expressions based on research that examines how different forms of sadness are perceived. Graham et al., (2008) showed that controlled expressions of sadness may evoke sympathy and support, but uncontrolled displays can be perceived as unprofessional or manipulative. In *Sadness 4* and in *Sadness 6*, Analyst A controls their sadness and expresses it in a tempered way. By contrast, in *Sadness 5*, Analyst A's visible tears signal some loss of emotional control, reflecting a higher-intensity expression that is less likely to be perceived as appropriate at work. In short, *Sadness 4* and *Sadness 6* reflect tempered and measured expressions of sadness, while the crying depicted in *Sadness 5* is more intense and less obviously appropriate.

No Response

7 *Analyst A chooses not to express their emotions because they don't want to make the situation worse and don't want to be accusatory or ruin their relationship with Analyst B.*

8 ***Analyst A chooses not to express their emotions because they think doing so won't accomplish anything and would be unprofessional. Analyst A doesn't want to develop a reputation as an overly emotional person.***

9 *Analyst A chooses not to express their emotions because they think it would be healthier to simply let it go. Analyst A tries to think about the situation from Analyst B's perspective and decides that, if the situation were reversed, they would want Analyst B to treat them the same way.*

We included No Response options because employees often choose not to confront coworkers to prevent escalation, protect relationships or avoid being labeled negatively and facing uncontrollable negative social or career consequences (Hashemi & Srivastava, 2024; Bastiaensen et al., 2025; Milliken et al., 2003). Prior research has indicated that not expressing your emotions leads to lower social support, less closeness to others, and lower social satisfaction (Srivastava et al., 2009). All the No Response responses involve Analyst A choosing to not express their emotions, but with 3 different reasons for doing so. In *No Response 7*, Analyst A wants to maintain a positive relationship. In *No Response 8, Analyst A* doesn't want to damage their reputation. In *No Response 9*, Analyst A doesn't see any benefit from expressing their emotions.

METHODS

Participants and Design

A total of 441 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk for a between-subject experiment to understand how people perceive different responses to a prototypical form of

workplace conflict. Participants were instructed to read the vignette selected from our pilot study and randomly assigned to read one of 9 responses to the depicted conflict. After excluding participants who failed attention checks or spent less than two minutes on the vignette, we analyzed a final sample of 356 participants (145 female; mean age = 36.75, SD = 11.80).

Materials and Measures

The vignette described how Analyst A had to complete an urgent project overnight because Analyst B failed to do their share. Data from our pilot study confirmed that the depicted conflict was seen as serious, common, and emotionally evocative (see Appendix I).

We selected six outcome dimensions commonly used in emotion perception and workplace behavior research (e.g., van Kleef, 2009; van Kleef & Cote, 2018; Tiedens, 2001; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Diefendorff et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2002). These metrics capture both instrumental and relational outcomes.

Participants read one of the nine responses attributed to Analyst A and rated the expresser on six key outcomes using 11-point scales (1 = very little, 11 = very much):

- **Predicted Behavior Change.** Participants assessed how likely Analyst B was to change their future behavior in similar situations.
- **Perceived Effectiveness.** Participants were asked for a holistic evaluation of how effective the response was at addressing the presented conflict.
- **Perceived Appropriateness.** Participants assessed how reasonable, justified, and appropriate the response seemed
- **Perceived Agency.** Participants were asked to evaluate the assertiveness, strength, toughness, and dominance of the expressor (Analyst A) based on the expresser's response.
- **Likability.** Participants rated the warmth and likeability of the expresser

- **Perceived Status.** Participants rated the perceived power, independence, leadership potential, and status of the expresser

Although predicted behavior change and perceived effectiveness are highly correlated (r = .60), they are intended to evaluate different aspects of the response. Perceived effectiveness measured participants' global evaluation of the response's efficacy, while predicted behavior change specifically measured the anticipated influence of the response on future actions.

Procedure and Analysis

Participants first read the vignette and the assigned emotional response, then completed the rating scales in random order. We conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs with response type as the independent variable and each of the six outcomes as the dependent variable:

We conducted a within category analysis first, which compared variants of the same emotion category, to identify the highest rated variant within each category. Then, we compared the highest rated responses within each category against each other.

RESULTS

Within-Category Comparisons

Looking within each category, clear performance differences emerged within the anger and sadness categories, while, interestingly, the no response category showed no significant differences on any dependent measures (i.e., the reasons given for not responding had no meaningful effect on how the response was evaluated).

Using one-way ANOVAs for each category, we found significant differences on our six outcome measures with anger and a significant difference for sadness on appropriateness (Table 1).

Table 1 ***Within-Category Emotional Expression Variants One-Way ANOVA Comparisons (Study 1) Means (SEs)***

Table 1 reports results of one-way ANOVAs conducted separately within each response category (Anger, Sadness, No Response) to identify which specific variant of each emotion was rated most favorably across key outcomes. These analyses determined the stimuli to be carried forward into Study 2. Means and standard errors are shown for each variant, with the F-tests indicating whether variants differed significantly within category.

As shown in Table 1, ratings for the three anger responses vary substantially across outcomes, ratings for the three sadness responses show intermediate variability, and ratings for the three no-response options are relatively similar, suggesting that the specific reason for not responding has little effect on evaluations. This pattern supports our characterization of anger as "riskier" and no response as relatively uniform. "Riskier" refers to greater dispersion across anger variants, where subtle changes in how anger is expressed had large differences in outcomes, especially perceived effectiveness, appropriateness, and behavioral impact.

Panel A: Within-category comparisons (Anger variants 1–3)

Outcome	Anger 1	Anger 2	Anger 3	F	p-value	η^2
Appropriateness	9.76 (0.27)	7.91 (0.47)	7.31 (0.47)	F(2,118) = 9.53	<.001	0.139
Effectiveness	8.38 (0.29)	6.36 (0.47)	6.09 (0.56)	F(2,118) = 7.94	<.001	0.119
Agency	9.08 (0.28)	8.73 (0.27)	7.08 (0.45)	F(2,118) = 9.76	<.001	0.142
Behavior Change	8.48 (0.27)	7.26 (0.42)	6.63 (0.50)	F(2,118) = 5.33	.006	0.083
Likability	8.18 (0.31)	6.40 (0.39)	7.16 (0.48)	F(2,118) = 5.55	.005	0.086
Status	8.66 (0.26)	7.49 (0.34)	8.12 (0.40)	F(2,118) = 3.34	.039	0.054

Note.

Anger 1 (Stern Anger): A calm, behavior-focused confrontation emphasizing team standards.
Anger 2: High-intensity, person-directed hostility (yelling, personal insults).
Anger 3: Passive-aggressive withdrawal (silent treatment, dirty looks).

Panel B: Within-category comparisons (Sadness variants 4–6)

Outcome	Sadness 4	Sadness 5	Sadness 6	F	p-value	η^2
Appropriateness	8.79 (0.43)	8.57 (0.44)	9.89 (0.26)	F(2,116) = 3.77	.026	0.061
Effectiveness	6.97 (0.47)	7.14 (0.44)	7.49 (0.40)	F(2,116) = 0.39	.680	0.007
Agency	6.67 (0.47)	6.88 (0.46)	7.68 (0.41)	F(2,116) = 1.52	.222	0.026
Behavior Change	5.69 (0.50)	7.13 (0.38)	6.64 (0.44)	F(2,116) = 2.51	.086	0.041
Likability	9.03 (0.39)	8.79 (0.28)	9.60 (0.22)	F(2,116) = 2.00	.139	0.033
Status	7.87 (0.47)	8.50 (0.31)	8.96 (0.25)	F(2,116) = 2.58	.080	0.043

Note.
Sadness 4: Relational disappointment focusing on lack of care.
Sadness 5: High-intensity distress with visible tears.
Sadness 6 (Tempered Sadness): A controlled admission of feeling disheartened and miserable regarding the team dynamic

Panel C: Within-category comparisons (No Response variants 7–9)

Outcome	No Response 7	No Response 8	No Response 9	F	p-value	η^2
Appropriateness	6.30 (0.58)	7.33 (0.40)	6.80 (0.44)	F(2,113) = 1.17	.313	0.020
Effectiveness	5.73 (0.60)	6.19 (0.46)	6.02 (0.52)	F(2,113) = 0.19	.827	0.003
Agency	4.82 (0.51)	4.80 (0.42)	4.62 (0.38)	F(2,113) = 0.07	.933	0.001
Behavior Change	4.21 (0.53)	4.08 (0.44)	4.72 (0.50)	F(2,113) = 0.50	.610	0.009

Likability	9.05 (0.40)	9.02 (0.28)	8.87 (0.33)	F(2,113) = 0.09	.915	0.002
Status	7.26 (0.47)	7.77 (0.32)	7.34 (0.37)	F(2,113) = 0.54	.585	0.009

Note.

No Response 7: Withholding expression to preserve the relationship.

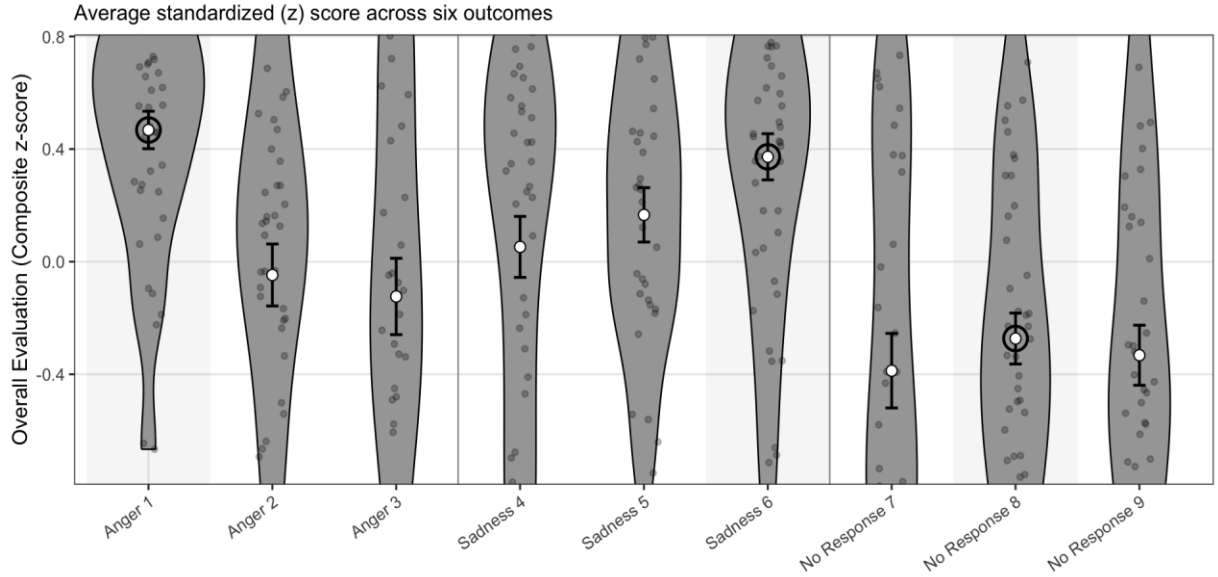
No Response 8 (Apprehensive Silence): Withholding expression to avoid reputation damage.

No Response 9: Withholding expression due to perspective-taking and 'letting it go.'

Figure 2 shows that overall evaluations differ meaningfully across specific response variants: controlled, norm-consistent emotional responses cluster higher on the composite index, whereas several alternative anger, sadness, and especially non-response variants cluster at or below the sample average. Each of six outcomes (appropriateness, effectiveness, agency, predicted behavior change, likability, and status) was z-standardized across the full sample and averaged, ensuring that no single outcome disproportionately drove the overall score due to differences in variance or baseline level. The distributional shapes also indicate that some variants produce relatively consensual judgments (narrower violins), while others are more polarizing (wider violins), underscoring that “anger” and “sadness” are not uniformly rewarded or penalized, but how the emotion is expressed matters. Consistent with this pattern, the focal exemplars (Anger 1, Sadness 6, and No Response 8; open circles) represent the strongest-performing variants within their respective categories and therefore serve as clear reference points.

Figure 2 ***Within-Category Comparisons Across Outcomes***

Figure 2 Within-Category Comparisons Across Outcomes (Composite Index)



es average standardized values across six outcomes. Open circles mark selected exemplars (Anger 1, Sadness 6, No Response 8). Vertical lines separate categories.

Among anger responses, **Anger 1** "Stern Anger" - a calm, behavior-focused expression - significantly outperformed **Anger 2** (intense, person-directed) and **Anger 3** (passive-aggressive) across all outcome measures, emerging as the most preferred expression of anger. For sadness, **Sadness 6** "Tempered Sadness" - a tempered, team-focused message - was rated most positively. It was seen as more appropriate than Sadness 4 or 5, $F(2, 116) = 3.77$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .06$, and it had the highest mean rating across most of our outcomes, though the differences were not statistically significant.

No significant differences appeared within the no-response conditions ($F(2, 113) = 1.17$, $p \geq .31$, $\eta^2 = .02$), indicating that the reason given for choosing not to respond had little effect on how the lack of a response was seen. **No response 8** "Apprehensive Silence" was chosen because it represents a common fear about expressing negative emotions at work (Hashemi & Srivastava, 2024; Bastiaensen et al., 2025) that we are directly testing in these experiments.

Based on these within-category comparisons, we selected **Anger 1 "Stern Anger"**, **Sadness 6 "Tempered Sadness"**, and **No Response 8 "Apprehensive Silence"** as representative responses for Study 2. Anger 1 was consistently the highest-rated across all outcomes, and omnibus tests showed significant differences among all anger variants on each outcome (ps ≤ .039). Sadness 6 was the most favorably evaluated sadness response, particularly on appropriateness, while maintaining high ratings on instrumental outcomes. No Response 8 had the highest mean ratings among no-response variants, though no differences across no-response variants reached statistical significance.

These patterns suggest that anger can be highly effective but carries greater risk due to variability in how it is perceived, whereas sadness provides a more reliable path to positive evaluations with fewer downsides.

Between-Category Comparisons

After identifying the best response withing each category, we ran between-category analyses to see which kind of response performed best overall. Specifically, we aggregated participants' evaluations of the highest rated exemplars (**Anger 1**, **Sadness 6**, and **No Response 8**) to determine which response performed best across our outcome measures ($n_{\text{Anger 1}} = 42$, $n_{\text{Sadness 6}} = 45$, $n_{\text{No Response 8}} = 42$).

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of response type on perceived effectiveness, $F(2, 126) = 7.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Anger 1 received the highest effectiveness ratings ($M = 8.38$, $SD = 1.87$), followed by Sadness 6 ($M = 7.49$, $SD = 2.68$), with No Response 8 receiving the lowest ratings ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 3.00$) (*Table 2*).

Table 2. ***Between-Category Comparisons (Study 1)***

Outcome	Anger 1	Sadness 6	No Resp 8	F	p-value	η^2
Appropriateness	9.76 (1.78)	9.89 (1.73)	7.33 (2.59)	F(2,126) = 20.70	<.001	0.247
Effectiveness	8.38 (1.87)	7.49 (2.68)	6.19 (3.00)	F(2,126) = 7.76	<.001	0.110
Agency	9.08 (1.80)	7.68 (2.77)	4.80 (2.70)	F(2,126) = 32.81	<.001	0.342
Behavior Change	8.48 (1.75)	6.64 (2.93)	4.08 (2.88)	F(2,126) = 30.53	<.001	0.326
Likability	8.18 (2.01)	9.60 (1.47)	9.02 (1.78)	F(2,126) = 7.14	.001	0.102
Status	8.66 (1.66)	8.96 (1.69)	7.77 (2.07)	F(2,126) = 4.99	.008	0.073

Both Anger 1 and Sadness 6 outperform No Response 8 on predicted behavior change, $F(2,126) = 30.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .33$. Anger 1 produced the highest predicted behavior change (M = 8.48, SD = 1.75), followed by Sadness 6 (M = 6.64, SD = 2.93), and No Response 8 (M = 4.08, SD = 2.88).

A similar pattern emerged for perceived agency, $F(2, 126) = 32.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$. Anger 1 was perceived as the most agentic (M = 9.08, SD = 1.80), Sadness 6 was also perceived as highly agentic (M = 7.68, SD = 2.77), and No Response 8 was perceived as comparatively low in agency (M = 4.80, SD = 2.70). Notably, although sadness is often stereotyped as a weaker or more submissive emotion, Sadness 6 nevertheless received relatively high agency ratings in this context.

On relational outcomes, the power of sadness was striking. Likability differed by response type, $F(2, 126) = 7.14$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, with Sadness 6 receiving the highest likability ratings of all 9 responses (M = 9.60, SD = 1.47), followed by No Response 8 (M = 9.02, SD = 1.78) and Anger 1 (M = 8.18, SD = 2.01). Appropriateness also differed by response type, $F(2, 126) = 20.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$. Descriptively, Sadness 6 (M = 9.89, SD = 1.73) and Anger 1 (M = 9.76, SD = 1.78)

were rated similarly high in appropriateness, whereas No Response 8 was rated notably lower (M = 7.33, SD = 2.59).

Perceived status differed by response type, $F(2,126) = 4.99$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Descriptively, Anger 1 (M = 8.66, SD = 1.66) and Sadness 6 (M = 8.96, SD = 1.69) received relatively similar status ratings, with No Response 8 receiving the lowest status ratings (M = 7.77, SD = 2.07).

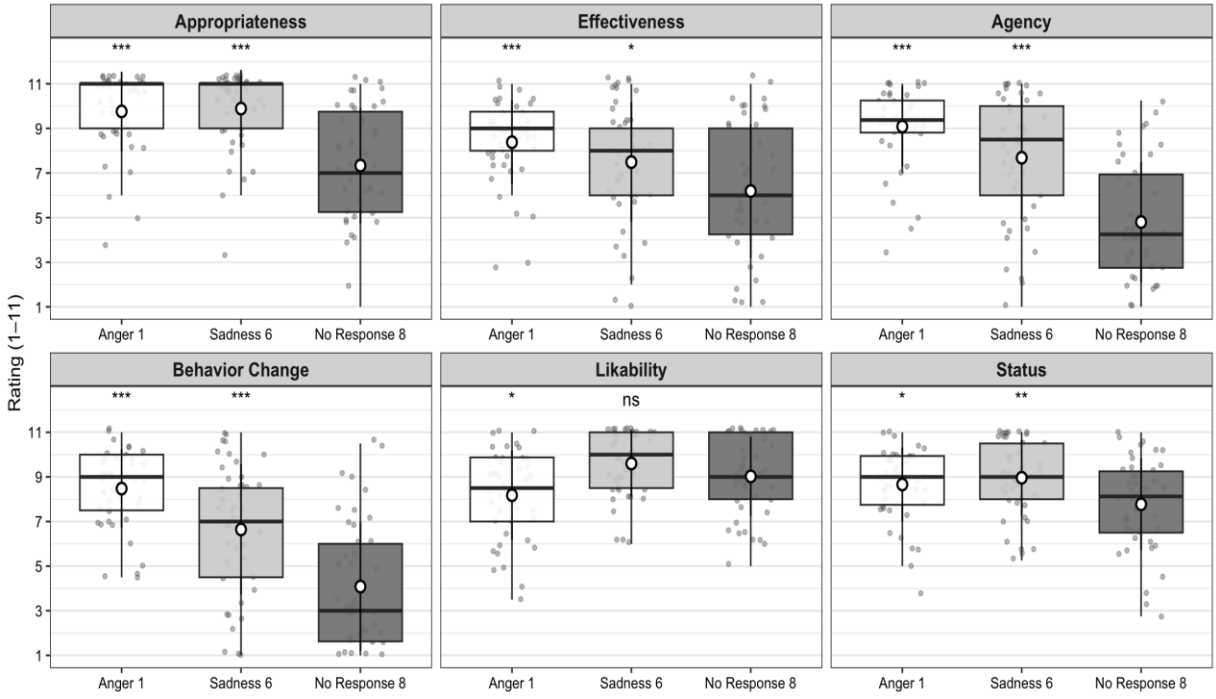
Sadness 6 emerged as the most relationally effective emotion: it was perceived as highly likeable, appropriate, and high status without incurring obvious costs to perceived effectiveness. Anger 1 did perform better on predicted behavior change and perceived agency, but it sacrificed likability in order to do so. No response offered modest relational benefits, primarily in terms of likability, but it fell short in pretty much every other respect.

Figure 3 plots the mean ratings and distributions for each emotional response across all six outcome measures.

Figure 3 ***Emotional Expressions vs. No Response Across All Six Measures***

Each facet shows Anger 1, Sadness 6, and No Resp 8 distributions, with mean ± 1 SD markers. The stars indicate significance in difference comparisons of the emotional responses against the No Response baseline

Figure 3: Emotional Expressions vs. No Response Across All Six Measures



DISCUSSION

Study 1 provides a foundation for understanding how the form of emotion expressions shapes their effects; establishes a baseline for each expression that is independent of gender, since the gender of the expresser was masked; and identifies the most effective form of expression within each emotion category. Within-category analyses (Table 1) identified Anger 1, Sadness 6, and No Response 8 as the strongest responses of their respective categories.

Correlations among outcomes (Figure 1) revealed two partially overlapping domains: instrumental outcomes (effectiveness, agency, predicted behavior change) and relational outcomes (likability, appropriateness, status), which help inform the between-category findings. The between-category analyses clarify how each response type performs when the best-case variants are compared against each other (See Table 2, 3).

Sadness is Surprisingly Powerful

Contrary to the common assumption that only dominant emotions characterize power and effectiveness, Study 1 demonstrates something surprising: sadness can be a powerful and effective response to workplace conflict.

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant effect by response type on perceived effectiveness ($F(2, 126) = 7.76$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .11$). Anger 1 had the highest **Effectiveness** ratings (M = 8.38, SD = 1.87), Sadness 6 was not far behind (M = 7.49, SD = 2.68), whereas No Response 8 received the lowest ratings (M = 6.19, SD = 3.00).

Both Anger 1 and Sadness 6 outperformed No Response 8 on predicted behavior change. $F(2,126) = 30.53$, $p< .001$, $\eta^2 = .33$. Anger 1 produced the highest rating (M = 8.48, SD = 1.75), followed by Sadness 6 (M = 6.64, SD = 2.93), and No Response 8 (M = 4.08, SD = 2.88).

On relational outcomes, Sadness 6 held a consistent edge. **Likability differed by response type** $F(2,126) = 7.14$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, with highest for Sadness 6 (M = 9.60, SD = 1.47), ahead of Anger 1 (M = 8.18, SD = 2.01) and statistically comparable to No Response 8 (M = 9.02, SD = 1.78). **Appropriateness** scores mirrored this pattern and differed by response type, $F(2,126) = 20.70$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .25$. Anger 1 (M = 9.76, SD = 1.78) and Sadness 6 (M = 9.89, SD = 1.73) both outperformed No Response 8 (M = 7.33, SD = 2.59. **Perceived status** differed by response type, $F(2,126) = 4.99$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Both Sadness 6 (M = 8.96, SD = 1.69) and Anger 1 (M = 8.66, SD = 1.66) significantly exceeded No Response 8 (M = 7.77, SD = 2.07), *p*s < .05. In short, sadness preserved or improved relational outcomes while obtaining better instrumental outcomes than choosing not to respond.

Traditional emotion theories often consider sadness as low-agency and therefore relatively ineffective at achieving instrumental outcomes (Tiedens, 2001; Kaiser et al, 2021;). Our findings challenge this assumption. Sadness 6 was perceived as more agentic than No Response 8 (M = 7.68

vs 4.80). While Anger 1 remains higher than Sadness 6 on instrumental outcomes, sadness had better outcomes in the relational domain, achieving comparable appropriateness and status while substantially improving likeability. Our results imply that associations like anger = dominant and sadness = submissive are too simple: when expressed in a measured, contextually appropriate way, both emotions can be appropriate, effective, and likable ways of addressing workplace conflicts.

Expression over Suppression

Across all instrumental measures, expressing either anger or sadness in any form generally outperformed choosing not to respond. Not responding is often believed to signal professional restraint; many people report that they feel uncomfortable expressing negative emotions, particularly when doing so may be seen as confrontational (e.g. Timmers et al., 1998). Our study found that even the variant of No Response that was perceived as the most appropriate reason for choosing not to respond (No Response 8) was still judged least effective , least agentic ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 2.70$, $p<.001$), and least likely to change the target's behavior ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 2.88$). On relational outcomes, likability was the highest rated outcome for the No Response category, but No Response 8 was nonetheless intermediate on likability ($M = 9.02$, $SD = 1.78$), surpassing Anger 1 ($M = 8.18$, $SD = 2.01$), but falling short of Sadness 6 ($M = 9.60$, $SD = 1.47$). Relative to Anger 1 and Sadness 6, No Response 8 was conferred the lowest status ($M = 7.77$, $SD = 2.07$). These patterns echo work on the interpersonal costs of suppression (Srivastava et al., 2009): suppressing emotions might look professional, but observers infer low impact, agency, and credibility.

IMPLICATIONS

The results from Study 1 lead to several important takeaways. One, expressing anger to address workplace conflict can be highly effective, but the form of the expression really matters. Uncontrolled outbursts and passive aggressive hostility are unlikely to help. Two, expressing sadness

can be a surprisingly effective way to address conflict, and sadness is less "risky" to express than anger: the variability on our outcome measures was significantly less for the variants of sadness we tested compared to the variants of anger. Three, because people are more likely to hide negative emotions than positive emotions (Jordan et al., 2014), and because employees often choose silence in response to workplace conflict (Milliken, 2003), we included a no-response condition to reflect this tendency to withhold negative feelings during workplace conflict; no matter how noble or rational the reason, this option was unambiguously evaluated as the least effective approach

Study 1 masked the expresser's gender by design to establish baseline results when gender is unknown and to identify the most successful responses within each response category. Study 2 seeks to replicate the pattern of results obtained in Study 1, and to test whether the expresser's gender moderates the outcomes. If observers view sadness and anger as comparably appropriate and effective when gender is unknown, do these perceptions hold once the expresser's gender becomes salient?

STUDY 2

Gender and Our Evolving Understanding of Emotions

Study 1 established that expressing anger or sadness to address workplace conflict significantly outperforms choosing not to respond, no matter how noble or rational the reason, and that sadness is surprisingly powerful, performing almost as well as anger on instrumental measures (e.g., agency, behavior change) and exceeding anger on relational outcomes (e.g., likability, appropriateness). Study 2 asks whether those evaluations hold when the expresser's gender is known. In exploratory analyses, we also examined if observers' age was associated with how anger and sadness were interpreted across male versus female expressers. There is a voluminous literature suggesting that gender influences how emotions are perceived (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Lewis,

2000; Plant et al., 2000; Hess et al., 2004, 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Marshburn et al., 2020). For example, in a job interview context, Brescoll & Ullman (2008) found that men who expressed anger were conferred significantly higher status than were women who expressed anger. They also found that women who expressed sadness were conferred higher status than women who expressed anger, but even when women expressed sadness, they were still conferred lower status than men who expressed anger. In a later study, Brescoll and colleagues (2018) found that women who were perceived as agentic were more likely to engender "moral outrage" when participants were primed to feel disgust than women who were perceived as communal. The authors argued that agentic women leaders trigger moral outrage because they violate the gender status hierarchy. Similarly, Heilman and colleagues (2004) found that women whose jobs were characterized as masculine were seen as significantly less likable than men in comparable jobs who received identical evaluations. Based on these and other similar findings, researchers have argued that women experience backlash when they are perceived to violate prescriptive gender norms, such as those that characterize anger as masculine – especially if they do so in occupations perceived as masculine.

Many studies that have found backlash effects on women, however, have focused on leadership roles (Lyness & Judiesch, 1999; Heilman, 2001; Heilman et al., 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Brescoll, 2016; Brescoll et al., 2018). Whether similar penalties apply to women working in less senior roles remains unclear. More recent evidence shows a cultural shift and suggests the backlash effect may not be universal to agentic women. Several studies show that agentic women can receive benefits rather than backlash: One study found that women top leaders were perceived to be even more agentic than men top leaders, and, crucially, that they were also perceived as warmer, friendlier, more caring, and more good-natured (Rosette & Tost, 2010). Another found that

"masculine" (high in aggressiveness, low in supportiveness) women high on self-monitoring received more promotions than women who were low on self-monitoring, low on masculinity, or low on both (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011). Encouragingly, the overlap between stereotypically masculine traits and leadership stereotypes has decreased over time (Koenig et al., 2011).

These research findings imply that perceptions of agency and warmth among women leaders have become more flexible over time. Recent cross-national research indicates that interpersonal pattern shifts within a broader global decline in sexism, though hostile and benevolent forms remain interlinked across cultures (Hammond et al., 2025). As instrumental and relational evaluations grow less tightly bound to gender expectations, cultural stereotypes linking agentic behavior to masculinity may be loosening. As workplaces diversify and emotional intelligence gains more explicit value (Hamedani et al., 2024), it has become increasingly possible for women to be perceived as both agentic and communal, and for men to display warmth and sadness without facing a raised eyebrow; it is possible for agentic women who are not communal to nonetheless avoid backlash effects. In other words, contextual appropriateness, rather than gender, may drive how workplace emotions are judged.

If agency is an important trait for both men and women on their path to becoming leaders (Badura et al., 2018; Judge et al., 2002; Ely et al., 2012; Rosette & Tost, 2010; Vial & Napier, 2018; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023), when does agency become detrimental for women but not men? Under what conditions do women's agentic behaviors stop eliciting backlash and start being interpreted as competence or authenticity?

Study 2 tests whether contextually appropriate emotional expressions override gender stereotypes in a masculine, high-pressure setting of investment banking. Using three highest rated responses (Anger 1 "Stern Anger", Sadness 6 "Tempered Sadness", and No Response 8

"Apprehensive Silence"), we examine how response type and expresser gender interact to shape perceptions of agency, effectiveness, appropriateness, likeability, and status.

Building on previous work showing backlash against stereotype-incongruent emotion expressions (eg. sad men; angry women) (Brescoll & Uhlmann 2008, 2016; Tiedens, 2001; Tiedens et al., 2000; Brescoll, Okimoto, & Vial 2018; Heilman et al.,2004; Heilman, 2001; Cheshin, 2020; Porat & Levy Paluck 2024), we aim to test whether contextual appropriateness mitigates backlash, regardless of gender. Women expressing anger will be perceived as agentic and effective as men expressing anger (instrumental outcomes), and men expressing sadness will be viewed as appropriate and likable as women expressing sadness (relational outcomes).

During analysis, additional patterns appeared suggesting that participants' age might relate to gender emotion norms. We conducted exploratory analyses on how generational differences reflect cultural evolution of the understanding and interpretations of emotions. If contextual appropriateness mitigates gender effects even in a traditionally masculine context, it suggests that cultural norms around emotional expressions are evolving away from gendered constraints, and contextual appropriateness drives the evaluation, regardless of gender.

METHODS

To test these hypotheses, we adapted the vignette from Study 1 to include the expresser's gender and participants' age as additional factors. Using the three highest rated responses from Study 1 - Stern Anger (Anger 1), Tempered Sadness (Sadness 6), Apprehensive Silence (No Response 8) - we examined whether the perceived instrumental and relational outcomes of emotional expression interacted with the expresser's gender and observer's generation. If contextual appropriateness drives the evaluation, regardless of gender, then we should see the same pattern

across genders, and generational differences show gradual cultural change. For the remainder of the paper, we refer to these simply as Anger, Sadness, and No Response, unless otherwise noted.

Participants and Design

After applying the same quality control criteria as was used in Study 1, a final sample totaling 570 participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (276 women; mean age = 41.51, SD = 12.88). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 x 2 factorial design (3 Response Types x 2 Expresser Genders). The number of male and female participants was approximately equal in all conditions.

Material and Measures

Study 2 presented an adapted version of the vignette used in Study 1, replacing "Analyst A" with "Alex" and "Analyst B" with "Brian." We manipulated the expresser's gender by changing the pronouns used to refer to Alex (he/him vs she/her) in the vignette and survey items (see Appendix 3) to ensure any differences can be attributed to gender alone.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of 6 conditions: Male Anger, Male Sadness, Male No Response, Female Anger, Female Sadness, Female No Response read one vignette (anger, sadness, no response x male, female), then rated the expresser on a series of outcomes. Item order was randomized.

All measures used 11-point Likert scales (1 = not at all, 11 = extremely) identical to Study 1. Multi-item scales were averaged; higher scores reflect stronger strength of the construct.

We enhanced the appropriateness measure to three items to capture a more nuanced scope of situational variability within the anger and sadness conditions on this measure, to the extend which participants thought the response was reasonable, justified, and appropriate (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

***Instrumental**:*

- **Predicted Behavior Change** (2 items: FairShare, Behavior; α > .80)
- **Perceived Effectiveness** (1 item: Effective)
- **Agency** (4 items: Assertive, Strong, Tough, Dominant; α > .90)
- **Perceived Status** (4 items: Power, Status, Independence, Leadership; α > .85)

***Relational**:*

- **Appropriateness** (3 items: Appropriate, Justified, Reasonable; α > .90)
- **Likability** (2 items: Warm, Likable; α > .80)

Scale reliability mirrored Study 1 for direct comparisons across studies between instrumental and relational domains.

Primary models were 3x2 factorial ANOVAs for each dependent variable. Following significant interactions, we conducted post-hoc pairwise comparisons. Based on Study 1's correlation structure distinguishing instrumental and relational domains, we also examined whether expresser gender moderated response type differences across the outcome measures families.

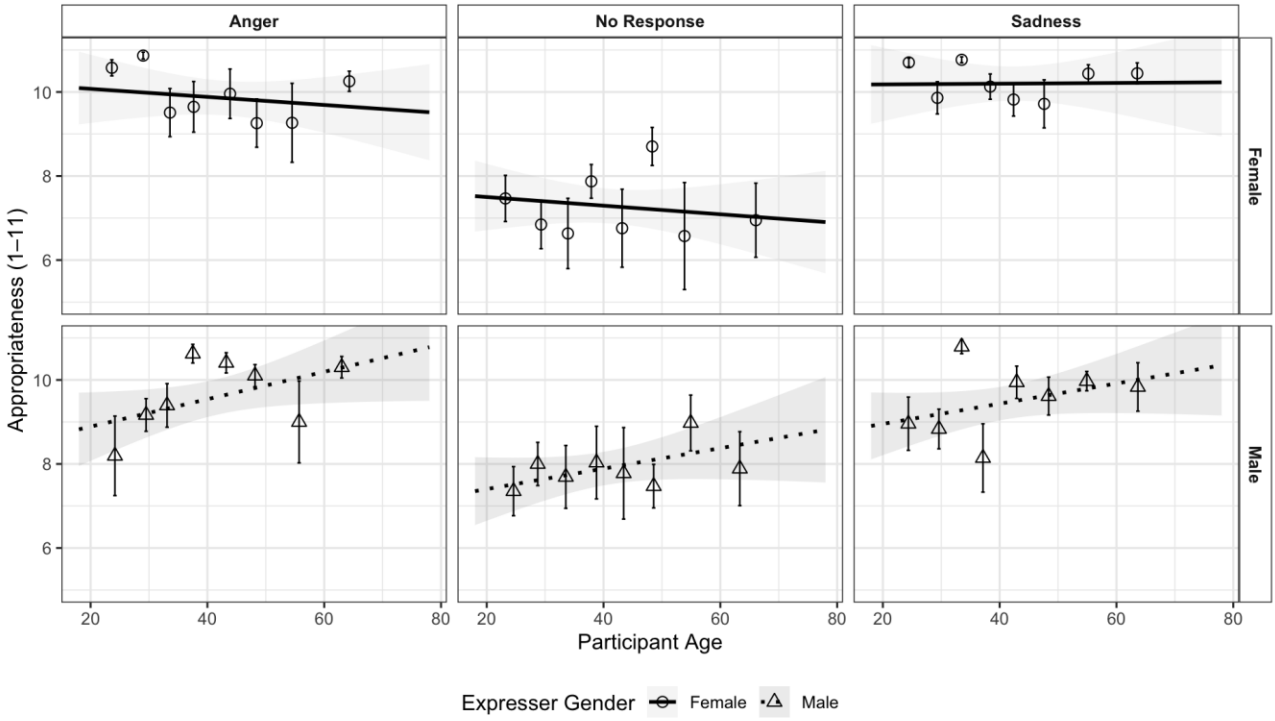
Participants' age was collected as a continuous variable. Exploratory analyses examined whether age moderated evaluations of anger, sadness, and no response in workplace conflict. For visualization only (Figure 5), we also present binned age groups to aid interpretation.

Figure 5 ***Three-way effects of Age × Gender × Response Type interaction on appropriateness ratings.***

Figure 5 shows exploratory age-related trends in the evaluation of emotional appropriateness by gender and response type: older participants display more gender-stereotypical evaluations (male-anger, female-sadness), whereas younger participants evaluated emotional appropriateness more evenly across genders.

Figure 5 Age × Expresser Gender × Response Type on Appropriateness

Lines & ribbons: model predictions (±95% CI). Points & bars: 8-bin means (±1 SE) for visualization only.



Note. Lines and shaded ribbons represent model-predicted appropriateness ratings (±95% confidence intervals) from a linear regression including Response Type (Anger, Sadness, No Response), Expresser Gender (Female, Male), Participant Age (continuous), and all interactions. Points and error bars show binned means (8 quantile bins) ±1 SE for visualization only. Statistical inference is based on the full individual-level model rather than the binned data. Although age-related trends appear visually distinct across response types and genders, the three-way interaction (Response Type × Expresser Gender × Age) was not statistically significant; a marginal Expresser Gender × Age interaction indicates modest age-related divergence between male and female expressers overall.

RESULTS

Study 2 examined whether evaluations of anger, sadness, and no response differed when the expresser's gender was known. We also conducted exploratory analyses of whether observer age moderated these evaluations.

Main Effects of Response Type and Gender

Across all measures, response type produced large effects (all $p < .001$), similar to the patterns found in Study 1: both anger and sadness outperformed no response across instrumental

(effectiveness, behavior change, agency, status) and relational (likability, appropriateness) outcomes. Across outcomes, both anger and sadness were evaluated more favorably than no response for both female and male expressers (Table 3; Figure 4).

In contrast, gender effects were generally minimal. Perceived status showed a small male advantage in the descriptive means (Table 3), but gender did not reliably show differences across other measures. These small effects suggest that contextually appropriate emotional expressions largely override gender stereotypes in workplace conflict, and women were not evaluated more harshly nor more positively than men.

Table 3 presents descriptive means and standard deviations by expresser gender and response type combination.

Table 3. ***Descriptive statistics by response type and expresser gender (Study 2)***

Group	Outcome	Female	Male
Anger	Appropriateness	9.85 (1.95)	9.58 (1.97)
	Effectiveness	7.81 (2.57)	7.52 (2.51)
	Agency	9.07 (1.93)	8.93 (1.77)
	BehaviorChange	7.66 (2.51)	7.26 (2.54)
	Likability	8.24 (2.36)	8.12 (1.95)
	Status	9.11 (1.86)	8.86 (1.90)
Sadness	Appropriateness	10.20 (1.21)	9.45 (1.90)
	Effectiveness	6.97 (2.81)	6.98 (2.87)
	Agency	7.63 (2.28)	6.94 (2.73)
	BehaviorChange	5.83 (2.83)	6.22 (2.66)
	Likability	9.19 (1.67)	8.73 (2.02)
	Status	9.04 (1.90)	8.61 (2.10)
No Response	Appropriateness	7.28 (2.43)	7.90 (2.44)

	Effectiveness	5.38 (3.36)	5.72 (3.37)
	Agency	4.85 (2.83)	5.14 (2.92)
	BehaviorChange	4.07 (2.86)	3.84 (3.13)
	Likability	8.71 (2.10)	9.12 (1.79)
	Status	8.30 (2.20)	7.89 (2.36)

Note. Values are means with standard deviations in parentheses.

Ratings are shown separately by response type (Anger, Sadness, No Response) and expresser gender (Female, Male).

Statistical tests reported in the text and Figure 4 are based on linear models with response type, expresser gender, and their interaction; pairwise contrasts compare Anger and Sadness to No Response within each gender.

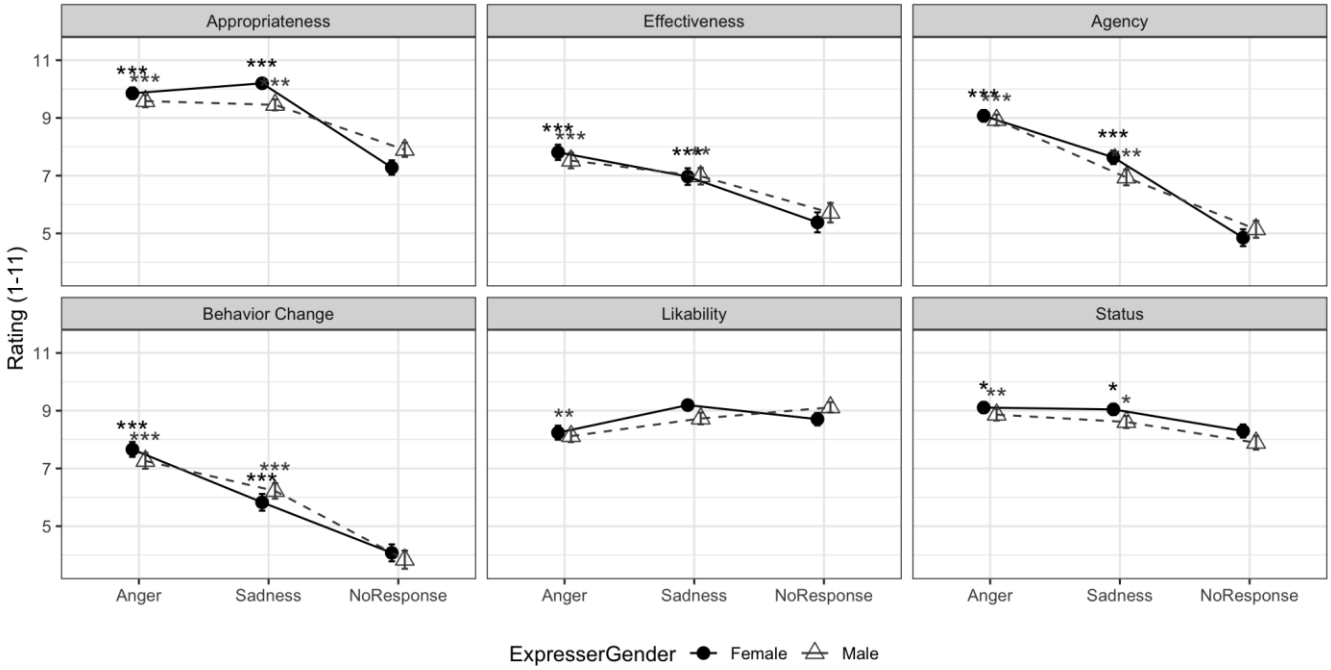
Outcome scales range from 1 to 11.

Figure 4. Gender × Response Type Interaction Across Outcomes.

Mean ratings (± SE) for six outcomes by expresser gender and response type. Stars indicate within-gender contrasts comparing Anger and Sadness to No Response (planned contrasts; $p < .05$, $\mathbf{p} < .01$, $\mathbf{p} < .001$). Higher scores indicate more favorable evaluations.

Figure 4. Gender × Response Type Interaction Across Outcomes

Mean ratings (± SE) for six outcomes by expresser gender and response type.
Stars indicate within-gender contrasts comparing Anger and Sadness to No Response
(planned contrasts; p < .05, p < .01, p < .001). Higher scores indicate more favorable evaluations.



In the anger condition, female and male expressers were evaluated similarly across outcomes (Table 3; Figure 4). For example, appropriateness was high for both (Female: M = 9.85, SD = 1.95; Male: M = 9.58, SD = 1.97), and perceived agency was likewise high (Female: M = 9.07, SD = 1.93; Male: M = 8.93, SD = 1.77).

Gender × Response Type interactions

Overall, gender differences were small. Across outcomes, anger and sadness were both rated more favorably than no response for both female and male expressers (Figure 4). Evidence for gender moderation was limited: the clearest difference emerged for appropriateness, where sadness was rated especially appropriate when expressed by women.

Consistent with this pattern, both women and men were rewarded for expressing anger and sadness relative to no response. We found no clear evidence that women were penalized for emotional expression in this context.

The only exception was appropriateness, where the Female × Sadness interaction was significant (b = 1.362, p< .01). As shown in *Table 3 and Figure 4*, participants rated sadness as more appropriate when expressed by women (M = 10.20, SD = 1.21), and also highly appropriate when expressed by men (M = 9.45, SD = 1.90). In contrast, no response was slightly more appropriate when expressed by men (M = 7.90) than women (M = 7.28). Anger, on the other hand, showed little gender difference (p> .10), indicating that anger expression was not viewed as inappropriate for either gender in this context.

A smaller interaction also emerged for likability, driven by female sadness being rated as somewhat more likable than male sadness (b = 0.873, p < .05). Anger was associated with reduced likability for both genders, whereas sadness modestly enhanced likability, particularly when expressed by women. Likability captures relational costs that may accompany instrumental gains, allowing us to examine whether effective responses undermine interpersonal relations.

Across all instrumental outcomes (effectiveness, agency, behavior change, status), gender did not moderate the effect of response type. Meanwhile, they remained significant for relational normative outcomes (appropriateness), suggesting that while women are seen as effective when sad, they are arguably rewarded for it more than men.

Participants' Age × Expresser's Gender × Responses Type Interaction

We also analyzed whether observers' age influenced their evaluations of emotional responses (Table 6). These models excluded the no-response condition and tested Age × Emotion × Gender interactions. While age did not meaningfully shift relational evaluations like likeability or appropriateness, older participants were generally less optimistic about effectiveness of sadness (b = -0.046, p< .05), and the likelihood of behavior change (b = -0.060, p< .01). Several interaction patterns emerged, however. Significant Emotion × Age terms indicated that older participants

generally evaluated anger more favorably than younger participants did on instrumental outcomes. Yet this age effect varied by expresser gender: the Emotion × Age × Female interaction was negative and significant for predicted behavior change, effectiveness, and agency. This pattern suggests that older observers reacted less favorably to anger when it was expressed by a woman, whereas their evaluations of male anger showed much smaller age differences. No comparable shifts appeared for sadness.

Overall, age exerted subtle and exploratory influences, but it did not alter the broader conclusion that evaluations depended far more on the type of emotional response than on the expresser's demographic characteristics.

DISCUSSION

Study 2 confirms the Study 1 pattern: when the response fits the context, expressing anger or sadness is judged far more effective and appropriate than staying silent. Across every outcome, the response main effect dwarfs gender, so observers rely on contextual fit rather than the expresser's sex. Female co-workers who voiced anger were seen as just as effective, agentic, likable, and appropriate as male colleagues—no evidence of backlash when the emotional response matched the situation.

The only gender × response effect appeared on appropriateness: sadness was judged as more appropriate when expressed by women, and silence a touch more acceptable from men. Beyond that, gender did not moderate evaluations.

Age effects were similarly modest. Most Age × Emotion × Gender interactions were non-significant, indicating that older and younger observers interpreted anger and sadness in broadly similar ways. Two patterns did emerge, however. Older participants tended to evaluate anger as slightly more agentic overall, and a small three-way interaction suggested that older observers

reacted less favorably to anger expressed by women, while showing relatively stable evaluations of anger expressed by men. These exploratory patterns were limited in magnitude and did not alter the broader conclusion: contextual appropriateness carried substantially more weight than demographic cues in shaping evaluations of emotional expression.

These findings suggest that contextual appropriateness continues to outweigh demographic cues. Evaluators appear to be willing to judge workplace emotional expressions by how well they fit the situation rather than by the expresser's gender or age. When anger or sadness is the appropriate reaction to a workplace conflict, women are not penalized for expressing it, and men do not automatically gain an advantage unless appropriateness norms distinctly favor their response.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across two studies, we investigated how expressing different emotions – anger, sadness, or withholding an emotional response – shapes outcomes in workplace conflict. The overarching pattern was clear: anger emerged as the most agentic and behavior-changing emotion, aligning with prior literature that links anger to perceptions of competence, dominance, and social status/power (Tiedens, 2001; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Van Kleef, 2010). Participants generally evaluated expressions of anger as signs of initiative and agency, and anger was indeed perceived to be highly effective in prompting the transgressor to address the problem. Our findings also qualify this classic picture in important ways, however. Crucially, *how* anger was expressed determined the degree of its advantage relative to expressing sadness or choosing not to respond. Only a mild, calm anger directed at the offending behavior produced uniformly positive reactions. This focused form of anger – essentially a firm but controlled confrontation of the issue – was not only perceived as the most effective way to change the target's behavior, but it also earned favorable evaluations across multiple domains, including perceived effectiveness, appropriateness, status conferral, and even

likability (though the winner on that latter measure was clearly expressing sadness). Other forms of anger were notably less effective at instrumental outcomes than expressions of sadness – typically seen as a submissive emotion. When anger veered into personal attacks or passive-aggressive tactics, it was no longer seen as more agentic, effective, and likely to change the target's behavior than expressions of sadness. Moreover, the likability advantage of sadness versus anger became even more evident, and it widened when anger was expressed in harsher ways. In the within-anger comparisons, less regulated anger (e.g. lashing out at the person's character, or expressing anger in indirect, passive-aggressive ways) undermined the very goals of conflict resolution: participants saw these responders as less effective, less likable, and lower in status than more controlled anger variant and the tempered responses of sadness. Thus, while anger can indeed be a powerful catalyst for change, our studies underscore that the power of anger depends on whether it's expressed in a controlled, contextually appropriate way. A tempered anger that targets the problem, not the person, harnesses anger's agency signaling without triggering the social costs of such a confrontational emotion – assuming the goal is to balance instrumental goals with relational outcomes.

Moreover, as noted throughout our paper, we want to spotlight the surprising power of sadness across our measures. Our results show that expressing sadness was almost as effective as anger in achieving instrumental outcomes like behavior change and perceived agency, and on relational measures, sadness outperformed even the best-case anger scenario. Participants evaluated sad responses as about as likely to amend the target's behavior as angry responses, suggesting that sadness – often rejected as a submissive, low-status emotion – carries its own form of influence. Responders who expressed sadness were rated as more likable and appropriate than those who showed anger, and, importantly, expressing sadness did not come at the expense of perceived agency or status conferral. On the contrary, sadness approached anger's agentic and competent levels as the

best-case angry responders, and more so than those who reacted with indiscriminate anger. In other words, sadness preserved the responder's perceived agency and status while also eliciting more sympathy and goodwill. This finding challenges the assumption that one must project "tough" emotions to be effective in the workplace. As prior negotiation research has shown, displays of sadness can sometimes be *more* effective than displays of anger in securing cooperation, by invoking empathy rather than intimidation (Van Kleef, et al., 2006, 2010; Côté & Hideg, 2011; Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006). Our studies add to this evidence, suggesting that a genuine expression of sadness can prompt accountability from others while keeping the social fabric intact. The emotional authenticity of sadness – when it reflects true concern or disappointment – may actually strengthen the responder's position by highlighting the relational stakes of the conflict. Consistent with this notion, researchers have cautioned that feigning toughness by surface acting via faking/suppressing one's true feelings can be counterproductive, whereas harnessing authentic sadness can be both natural and effective in conflict situations (Grandey, 2003; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Srivastava et al., 2009). Our findings support this view: a sad response, delivered sincerely, appears to strike a balance between asserting that a problem matters and signaling goodwill, thereby driving change without damaging relationships.

Finally, our results speak to gender dynamics (or the lack thereof) in emotional expressions at work, as well as intriguing exploratory generational shifts in these dynamics that may inform future research. Strikingly, we found no significant gender differences in how anger or sadness expressions were received on most outcomes. Contrary to classic expectations of a double standard, men and women who expressed anger or sadness were judged similarly in terms of effectiveness, competence, likability, and status. This null effect of gender held across both instrumental and relational evaluations, offering a counterpoint to longstanding beliefs that "angry women" are

penalized or "sad men" are seen as weak. In fact, our data align with recent evidence that, in contemporary workplaces, observers do not necessarily reward men or punish women for the same emotional displays (Porat & Levy Paluck, 2024). This finding qualifies longstanding claims that identical emotional behavior yields opposite outcomes for women and men, suggesting that such gendered reactions may be more context-dependent and less universal than previously assumed (e.g., Victoria L. Brescoll & Eric Luis Uhlmann, 2008). Classic studies demonstrated that an angry man was often esteemed as competent and conferred higher status (Tiedens, 2001; Tiedens et al., 2000), whereas an angry woman suffered backlash – deemed less competent, less likable, and lower in status. Likewise, men showing sadness were historically viewed less favorably than women doing so. In an employment context, crying men are often viewed as less competent than crying women (Fischer, 2013).

Our results suggest that these gendered scripts are changing. The absence of broad gender effects implies a possible cultural shift: it appears that many people today evaluate emotional expressions through a more gender-neutral lens, focusing on the content and context of the emotion rather than the speaker's gender. We did see some exploratory evidence of gender-stereotyped evaluations of anger and sadness, however: older observers reacted less favorably to anger expressed by women, whereas younger observers showed little such bias. Overall, these patterns suggest that workplace norms may be evolving toward greater equality in emotional agency, validating calls for both men and women to be "allowed" a full range of emotions at work. The important consideration is not the gender of the expresser but rather the appropriateness of the emotion in context and the tradeoff between instrumental outcomes (on which anger has a slight advantage) and relational outcomes (on which sadness has the clear advantage).

The Manner and Form of Emotion Expression

Our investigation underscores that emotional expressions in conflict are highly context-dependent, and that the manner and form of expression can make the difference between effective resolution and counterproductive escalation. Anger, despite its reputation as a "powerful" emotion, can be a double-edged sword: when expressions of anger cross the line into personal hostility or appear uncontrolled, they are often viewed as inappropriate, overreactive, and harmful to workplace goals (Cheshin, 2020; Van't Riet et al., 2018; Callister et al., 2017; Gibson et al., 2009). These harsh perceptions help explain why indiscriminate anger tends to undermine the responder's effectiveness and status (Tiedens, 2001; Gibson et al., 2009; Callister et al., 2017), as we can see from the responses to Anger 2 and Anger 3 in Study 1. Consistent with the dual threshold model of anger expression (Gibson & Callister, 2010), only low-intensity, controlled anger expressions led to uniformly positive outcomes in Study 1, whereas high-intensity or norm-violating anger was counterproductive. These results suggest that voicing anger in a civil, problem-focused manner (e.g. calmly explaining why a behavior is unacceptable and must change) can harness anger's benefits without incurring interpersonal penalties. By contrast, yelling, insulting, or stewing in silent resentment fails both tests of appropriateness and effectiveness.

Our findings dovetail with prior observations that anger is most constructive when directed at the target's behavior (i.e., is not personal), delivered with low intensity, and expressed in settings where anger is appropriate (Steinel et al., 2008; Van't Riet et al., 2018; Callister et al., 2017; Gibson et al., 2009; Cheshin, 2020). When these conditions are met (as we can see with Anger 1), anger can actually improve conflict outcomes and be seen as a reasonable, even positive, response to wrongdoing. Thus, manner and form dominate the interpersonal effects of the expressed emotion: anger per se is not a guaranteed boon or bane – it is the way anger is framed and delivered that determines its impact. This departs from much of the research on the interpersonal consequences of

negative emotion expression, which tends to treat expressed emotions categorically. Anger can have quite positive effects, but it can also backfire. Notably, sadness appears to be a less "risky" expression – the variance on our outcome measures for the different versions of sadness we tested was significantly less than the variance created by the different versions of anger.

Sadness emerged as a somewhat "softer" strategy that nonetheless carried clout. The effectiveness of sadness in prompting change might be explained by the social information it conveys. A sad response to conflict often signals that one is disappointed or hurt rather than aggressive (van Kleef et al., 2006; Sinaceur et al., 2015) – effectively placing the onus on the wrongdoer to remedy the situation out of conscience or empathy. Our participants perceived sadness as reasonably agentic (well above the midpoint of our perceived agency scale) and highly likable, illustrating the power of what might be called "sympathy leverage" in conflict. This aligns with negotiation research showing that expressions of sadness can elicit greater concession-making from counterparts by making them feel more sympathy and concern for the expresser (Sinaceur et al., 2015). Importantly, sadness achieved a striking dual benefit: it drove instrumental outcomes (behavior change) nearly as well as anger, while fostering more goodwill. It is also important to note that the current investigation focused on establishing the interpersonal consequences of these expressions rather than the internal affective states of the observer. Therefore, while our findings align with a mechanism of sympathy or guilt, we did not explicitly measure these specific mediators. Future research should distinguish whether compliance is driven by observer empathy, as we suspect, or by other inferential processes. These findings challenge a simplistic dominance model of conflict (where only anger shows strength) and instead support a more nuanced view of emotional agency. One can assert authority through calm resolve or heartfelt disappointment – it need not be through fury. By showing genuine sadness about a problem, a leader or employee might

communicate how seriously they value the issue (implying high standards and commitment) without resorting to intimidation. This strategy can "call in" colleagues to resolve a problem rather than "calling them out" harshly, thereby addressing the issue with less collateral damage to trust and team cohesion.

Challenging Classic Assumptions About Dominance and Agency

Taken together, these findings invite a reconsideration of traditional assumptions about which emotions denote strength and effectiveness in the workplace. Classic portrayals of "agentic" emotions have overwhelmingly centered on anger, casting it as the emotional language of dominance, assertiveness, and competence (Tiedens, 2001; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Gibson & Callister, 2010; van Kleef, 2008, 2010). By contrast, emotions like sadness have often been stereotyped as "weak" or submissive, and thus assumed to be ill-suited to influencing others or asserting one's will. Our research challenges this dichotomy. Yes, anger signals agency – our participants tended to believe expressing anger would be the most likely to change the target's behavior – but we found that this advantage was only clear for the best-case version of anger; other forms of anger held no advantage over sadness on instrumental outcomes. Moreover, sadness proved to be a "powerful" emotion in its own right. In our data, a sad response was able to garner almost 90 percent of the instrumental benefits (behavior change, agency, and effectiveness) achieved by the most effective anger response, and expressing sadness also better preserved likability, appeared more appropriate, and even preserved perceived status while improving relational impressions. This directly contradicts the notion that anger uniquely conveys strength.

Importantly, our null gender findings chip away at the notion that agency and emotion expressions are gender stereotyped. Historically, anger has been culturally coded as a masculine "high-power" emotion and sadness as a feminine "low-power" emotion (Tiedens, Ellsworth, &

Mesquita, 2000; Tiedens, 2001; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). Women who wielded anger were often punished for violating their expected communal role, and men who showed sadness or vulnerability risked being seen as too weak. Our results show an attenuation of these gendered expectations across the majority of our study participants. We did observe one boundary condition: older participants tended to rate angry women less favorably to angry men, whereas younger participants showed little such bias. In other words, the classic stereotype-driven reactions surfaced primarily among older participants. This generational divergence, while not the core focus of our studies, is noteworthy. It suggests that the well-documented "anger penalty" for women and "sadness penalty" for men have not vanished entirely but may be fading with newer generations. Older individuals who came of age in a time of stricter gender roles might still consciously or unconsciously apply those outdated templates when evaluating emotional behavior. Younger individuals, by contrast, appear more accustomed to egalitarian norms in emotional expression. This shift across age cohorts aligns with the idea of a gradual cultural evolution in expectations: as societal views on gender and emotion continue to progress, we may see a future where an "angry woman" or a "tearful man" raises few eyebrows and carries little stigma.

Our data provide an optimistic glimpse of that future, even as they remind us that some lingering biases remain. We frame these age-related results as exploratory but illuminating – they suggest cultural norms around gender are gradually reshaping longstanding gender-based stereotypes, although definitive conclusions await future research designed specifically to test these generational dynamics.

Contextual Appropriateness of Emotion Expression in Conflict Resolution

Another significant theme from this research is the importance of contextual appropriateness when choosing how to respond to workplace conflicts. Emotions do not exist in a vacuum; the same

expression can be judged very differently depending on timing, place, and manner (Cheshin, 2020; van Kleef, 2009, 2010; Diefendorff et al., 2011). Our "Anger 1" condition – calm, focused anger – can be viewed as a case of maximized appropriateness in context: the emotion was delivered at the right intensity, focused on the right target (the problem), and justified by the circumstances. As a result, it was rewarded with higher status conferral, higher perceived effectiveness, higher likelihood of changing the target's behavior, and even reasonably high likability ratings. The less appropriate forms of anger we studied either overstepped boundaries by attacking the person or sidestepped direct communication by being covertly hostile; they were comparatively inappropriate and thus ineffective. However, these results may be specific to the "victim" contexts in our vignette, where sadness aligns with the harm suffered. Contextually, if the conflict was a difference of opinion rather than a violation of fairness/workload, we might see a different emotional expression deemed appropriate.

Our research supports a growing recognition in organizational psychology that effective conflict resolution is about emotion articulation, not emotion suppression (Srivastava et al., 2009; Cheshin, 2020; van Kleef, 2008, 2009, 2010; Grandey, 2003; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). The goal is not to have no emotions, but to appropriately, constructively, and authentically express the emotions you feel (Cheshin, 2020; Diefendorff et al., 2011; Van't Riet et al., 2018). Emotions are signals, and the information in the signal can only be received if some form of the emotion is expressed (van Kleef, 2008, 2009, 2010; van Kleef & Côté, 2018; Frijda, 1986). The success of sadness in our studies, alongside the conditional success of anger, emphasizes that there is more than one emotional path to resolving conflict. By embracing emotional authenticity and ensuring the expression aligns with the context, individuals can resolve conflicts in a manner that both addresses the immediate issue and preserves (or even strengthens) working relationships.

CONCLUSION

These studies advance our understanding of emotional expressions as sophisticated communication tools. They support the commonsense view that *what* emotion one expresses, *how* one expresses it, and *the interaction* between the expression and the context profoundly shapes its interpersonal effects. Anger, often lauded as a sign of strength, indeed has a formidable impact on behavior change, but it is a tool that must be wielded with care to avoid collateral damage. Sadness, often shunned in professional contexts, proved to be a dark horse – a quietly effective strategy that promoted instrumental outcomes without sacrificing relational ones. Together, these findings urge a rethinking of traditional advice around workplace emotions. Rather than simply encouraging employees to "be assertive" (implicitly endorsing strategic anger) or to "stay positive" (i.e., avoid negative emotions altogether), the nuanced message is to be genuine yet mindful of context: express the emotion that truly reflects the situation, and do so in a manner that respects context and norms. Such an approach fosters integrity and situational appropriateness, which our research shows are rewarded with greater cooperation and esteem.

By challenging classic assumptions about dominance and emotion, our work also reflects broader cultural currents. The largely gender-neutral reactions to anger and sadness in our data hint at an organizational culture moving toward more egalitarian emotional norms, where contextual appropriateness is valued over antiquated gender prescriptions. At the same time, the generational hints of bias remind us that this evolution is ongoing – awareness and continued effort are needed to fully dispel stereotype-based reactions where they linger.

The ability to express emotions authentically and appropriately at work is a critical component of healthy conflict resolution and effective leadership. Our findings suggest that employees and leaders alike can navigate conflicts successfully by being true to their emotions and

respectful of others. Negative emotion expressions, when aligned with the context, are not outbursts or signs of weakness; they are potent signals and social tools. In the modern workplace, anger and sadness each have their place in addressing conflict. Anger prioritizes instrumental outcomes, whereas sadness balances instrumental outcomes with relational ones. The decision to express one over the other comes down to which side of the ledger matters more in context.

SUPPLEMENTARY SECTION

PILOT STUDY

Consider a common scenario: Your colleague failed to complete their share of the group work, forcing you to work through the night to meet the deadline. How would you react, emotionally? Which emotional expression would you choose and what goals do you hope to achieve when you express such emotion? Which emotion expression would feel appropriate, and which might be effective?

To understand how people navigate these emotional dilemmas in workplace conflicts, we wanted to first establish scenarios that provoke genuine emotional responses, reflect common workplace experience, are morally clear to establish one person's unfairness and to eliminate confounding attributes, and allow various emotional responses within reasonable range.

We conducted a pilot study to document the baseline of people's lay intuitions on emotional responses' appropriateness and effectiveness in workplace conflict in controlled conditions.

METHODS

Two workplace conflict vignettes were designed to ensure our findings can be generalized and not scenario specific. Both scenarios are between two first-year investment banking analysts where analyst B fails to complete his assigned work, making the other analyst A to work overnight to complete the joint responsibility.

We chose investment banking as the workplace context because previous research suggests agentic women are most likely to face backlash in gender-incongruent roles (e.g. Heilman et al., 2004; Brescoll et al., 2018), setting up for sequential gender effect testing. We piloted two vignettes of the same workplace conflict to verify that the scenario reliably feels serious and common, and to ensure that any subsequent effects are not driven by idiosyncratic features of a single vignette.

In vignette 1, the reasons for Analyst B's behavior are unclear, whereas in vignette 2, Analyst B explicitly provides a feeble and inadequate excuse. We initially hypothesized that explicit excuses (vignette 2) would likely provoke more anger than ambiguous explanations (vignette 1). To validate the conflict content without introducing gender-based stereotypes at the selection stage, we masked the analysts' genders in the pilot and manipulated gender only in the main experiments. Using a between-subjects design, 123 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and randomly assigned to read one of two vignettes (vignette 1, n = 62, vignette 2, n = 61).

After reading one of the two vignettes, participants rated how angry and sad they thought Analyst A would feel (1 = not at all, 11 = extremely).

Insert Table 7 about here

RESULTS

Both scenarios showed no significant differences across all measures (all differences $p>.44$).

Insert Table 8 about here

Both scenarios successfully represented realistic and emotion-provoking workplace conflict. Most participants (vignette 1: 87%, vignette 2: 89%) rated above 7 on the 11-point scale for seriousness and commonality.

Both scenarios provoke strong emotions. Participants rated Analyst A similarly in both scenarios. In both vignettes, participants chose anger as the most likely and appropriate emotional response. This indicates that people intuitively acknowledged the violation.

However, when asked about effectiveness, participants had less confidence in anger. This ratings of appropriateness (54.84%~57.38%) and effectiveness (25.8%~26.2%) created an interesting paradox gap of over 30 points, indicating that while people think anger is morally justified, they have significant doubt about whether it "works."

Meanwhile, while fewer participants chose sadness as appropriate among them, sadness is clearly effective. This finding shows a surprisingly reversed pattern from anger, showing that people may have intuitively sensed that sadness might contribute to workplace conflict resolution more than most people might have realized.

While Anger dominates in both vignettes, and sadness is identical in both, showing no differential effects in the two vignettes, both anger and sadness ratings are above the midpoint. This has created a choice between equally valid options. We selected scenario 1 for the subsequent studies, where ambiguous responsibility was present for our main studies, which aligns with established emotion research in Tiedens et al.'s (2000) influential work, and reflecting the real world experience where explanations often not provided or clear.

Our findings show that sadness seems natural to people, as people do expect and sense sadness, but it might be more complex than we realized, or more unfamiliar to us than what anger may achieve. This suggests that we haven't recognized the two opposite appropriateness-effectiveness gaps, and this may be the result of socializing, rather than evidence-based.

Mean ratings and standard errors for each scale, and counts for the forced choice questions, are presented in Figure 1.

TABLES

Study 2

Table 4 ***Mean Differences (Δ) from No Response by Emotion and Expresser Gender***

Entries are mean differences (Emotion − No Response) estimated within gender; p-values test whether the difference differs from zero.

Table 4a ***Anger vs No Response (within gender): Δ and p-values from t-test***

	Female		Male	
Outcome	**delta_Female**	**delta_Male**	**p_value_Female**	**p_value_Male**
Agency	4.223	3.788	< .001	< .001
Appropriateness	2.574	1.688	< .001	< .001
Behavior Change	3.585	3.423	< .001	< .001
Effectiveness	2.426	1.806	< .001	< .001
Likability	-0.468	-0.997	0.268	< .001
Status	0.811	0.975	0.013	0.004

Table 4b Sadness vs No Response (within gender): Δ and p-values from t-test

	Female		Male	
Outcome	**delta_Female**	**delta_Male**	**p_value_Female**	**p_value_Male**
Agency	2.783	1.796	< .001	< .001
Appropriateness	2.920	1.558	< .001	< .001
Behavior Change	1.752	2.382	< .001	< .001
Effectiveness	1.585	1.263	< .001	0.009
Likability	0.487	-0.386	0.146	0.271
Status	0.747	0.721	0.026	0.045

Note. Entries are mean differences (Expression - No Response). P-values calculated using Robust Standard Errors (HC3).

Table 5 ***Regression Coefficients Predicting Evaluative Outcomes from Emotional Expression and Expresser Gender (b, Robust SE)***

Predictors	Appropriateness	Behavior Change	Effectiveness	Perceived Status	Likability	Agency
Female	-0.615 (0.353)	0.236 (0.433)	-0.334 (0.487)	0.409 (0.330)	-0.409 (0.283)	-0.290 (0.416)
Anger	1.688*** (0.325)	3.423*** (0.417)	1.806*** (0.434)	0.975** (0.314)	-0.997*** (0.276)	3.788*** (0.351)
Sadness	1.558*** (0.312)	2.382*** (0.413)	1.263** (0.446)	0.721* (0.318)	-0.386 (0.272)	1.796*** (0.403)
Female × Anger	0.887 (0.458)	0.162 (0.574)	0.620 (0.617)	-0.164 (0.434)	0.529 (0.429)	0.436 (0.500)
Female × Sadness	1.362** (0.420)	-0.630 (0.587)	0.323 (0.636)	0.026 (0.438)	0.873* (0.389)	0.987 (0.551)
Intercept	7.896*** (0.247)	3.838*** (0.316)	5.717*** (0.341)	7.889*** (0.239)	9.116*** (0.181)	5.141*** (0.295)
Observations	570	570	570	570	570	570
R^2	0.220	0.216	0.084	0.043	0.039	0.311

Note. Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Anger and Sadness are dummy-coded relative to a no-response baseline. Higher scores indicate more favorable evaluations of the expresser. * $p < .05$, ** $\mathbf{p} < .01$, ***$\boldsymbol{p} < .001$.

Table 6 ***Anger × Age × Female predicting evaluative outcomes vs Sadness as Baseline***

Predictor	Appropriateness	Behavior Change	Effectiveness	Perceived Status	Likability	Agency
Intercept	8.473*** (0.580)	8.670*** (0.849)	8.838*** (0.877)	7.716*** (0.628)	7.919*** (0.658)	8.018*** (0.722)
Anger	-0.235 (0.859)	-2.222 (1.258)	-2.091 (1.300)	-0.723 (0.931)	-0.724 (0.976)	-0.814 (1.070)
Age	0.024 (0.014)	-0.060** (0.020)	-0.046* (0.020)	0.022 (0.015)	0.020 (0.015)	-0.026 (0.017)
Female (1 = female)	1.691 (0.893)	-3.888** (1.307)	-1.871 (1.351)	1.056 (0.967)	1.172 (1.014)	-1.188 (1.112)

Anger × Age	0.009 (0.020)	0.080** (0.029)	0.064* (0.030)	0.023 (0.022)	0.003 (0.023)	0.068** (0.025)
Anger× Female	0.338 (1.255)	6.900*** (1.839)	4.003* (1.899)	2.033 (1.360)	0.493 (1.425)	3.523* (1.563)
Age × Female	-0.023 (0.021)	0.085** (0.030)	0.046 (0.031)	-0.016 (0.022)	-0.017 (0.023)	0.045 (0.026)
Anger × Age × Female	-0.019 (0.029)	-0.146*** (0.042)	-0.089* (0.043)	-0.052 (0.031)	-0.019 (0.033)	-0.098** (0.036)
Observations	377	377	377	377	377	377
R^2	0.048	0.112	0.036	0.044	0.054	0.163

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *Emotion* is dummy-coded (Anger = 1, Sadness = 0). *Female* is coded 1 = female, 0 = male. Age is continuous and mean-centered. All models include the full Emotion × Age × Female interaction. Analyses are restricted to anger and sadness conditions (no-response excluded). Higher values indicate more favorable evaluations of the expresser. $p < .05$*, **p** < .01, ***p*** < .001.

Table 7 Pilot study participants demographics:

	Vignette 1	**Vignette 2**	**Total**

N	62	61	123
Gender			
Male	38 (61.3%)	44 (72.1%)	82 (66.7%)
Female	23 (37.1%)	17 (27.9%)	40 (32.5%)
Age M(SD)	34.64 (9.42)	33.43 (8.44)	34.03 (8.93)
Duration M(SD)	169.2 (230.6)	185.6 (273.8)	177.3 (252.0)

Table 8 Pilot study vignette comparison

	Vignette 1 (N = 62)	**Vignette 2 (N = 61)**	**Statistical Test**
Continuous Measures			
M(SD):			
Anger-provoking	9.42 (1.61)	9.15 (2.27)	t = 0.76, p = .45
Sadness	6.18 (3.00)	6.16 (2.74)	t = 0.03, p = .98
Perceived Seriousness	8.69 (2.08)	8.57 (1.83)	t = 0.33, p = .74
Commonality	7.55 (2.41)	7.82 (2.31)	t = -0.63, p = .53
Categorical Choices N(%):			
Chosen as most likely response- Anger	40 (64.5%)	38 (62.3%)	χ^2 = 0.23, p = .63
Most Appropriate - Anger	35 (56.5%)	34 (55.7%)	χ^2 = 0.08, p = .78
Most Effective - Anger	16 (25.8%)	22 (36.1%)	χ^2 = 0.003, p = .96
Most Appropriate - Sadness	7 (11.3%)	5 (8.2%)	χ^2 = 0.01, p = .97
Most Effective - Sadness	12 (19.4%)	5 (8.2%)	χ^2 = 0.02, p = .96

Table 9: Balance Table for Participant Characteristics – Study 1

	(1)	(2)

	Anger Response	Sadness Response
Participant Age	-0.000	0.003
	(0.840)	(0.146)
Participant Female	-0.038	0.051
	(0.461)	(0.315)
Salary	0.000	-0.000
	(0.643)	(0.407)
Constant	0.324*	0.283*
	(0.012)	(0.027)
R-squared	0.002	0.011
Observations	356	356
Joint F-stat	0.267	1.251
Joint test p-value	0.849	0.291

p-values in parentheses
H0 (joint test): Age, Gender, and salary jointly have no predictive effect on assignment
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 10: Balance Table for Participant characteristics - Study 2

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Expresser Female	Anger Response	Sadness Response
Participant Age	0.002	0.001	-0.000
	(0.192)	(0.478)	(0.939)
Participant Female	-0.032	0.001	-0.045
	(0.448)	(0.987)	(0.261)
Salary	0.000	0.000	0.000*
	(0.130)	(0.402)	(0.016)
Constant	0.274*	0.197	0.145
	(0.017)	(0.066)	(0.182)
R-squared	0.008	0.002	0.012
Observations	570	570	570
Joint F-stat	1.590	0.461	2.272
Joint test p-value	0.191	0.710	0.079

p-values in parentheses
H0 (joint test): Age, Gender, and salary jointly have no predictive effect on assignment
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

TABLE 11 *Selected comments from Study 2 participants.*
The full set of comments is available here.

Anger	• I have played this same scenario out more than once in my job career. I admire the young lady in her actions. In general people don't confront other workers that do not do their fair share of work. *[Female, Male, 63]* • Interesting survey. It is very difficult to be in an assertive position without negatively impacting working relationships. Are there other surveys asking the same questions with scenarios depicting: man vs. woman, woman vs. woman, etc? Curious what the overall data would show. *[Female, Male, 62]* • I've been in just that situation. The response was perfect. *[Male, Female, 55]*
Sadness	• I feel bad for Alex. He seems sweet. Brian is not someone I would ever want to work with. I'm much more of an Alex than a Brian. *[Male, Female, 60]* • What I am thinking about at the moment is that this is a very common workplace conflict. In would be very interesting to see if the statistics are heavily similar to my responses and determine which new organization management and leadership progresses to implement for future organizations. This appears to happen quite often and can cause organizations to lose valuable employee assets if the situation is not resolved or if the worker is not properly compensated. Anyways, thank you and I hope your study serves to help those that find themselves in this situation! *[Male, Female, 33]* • I have a friend going through his master's program who is constantly in the same situation as Alex. *[Female, Male, 30]*
No Response	• I feel sorry for Alex. I've actually been in very similar situations in school, where I've had to work on the entire project by myself because nobody else in the group cares about doing the work. I'd like to think, if I were Alex in this example, I would've said something about it. But her rationale for not doing so is understandable...so maybe I wouldn't either. *[Female, Female, 28]* • While I can understand Alex's unwillingness to be seen as "over emotional" if she says or does anything to express her anger over the situation I cannot agree with her decision, and can only express my wish that more women would quit caring what other people think of them and speak up and be loud when it is needed to be this way. *[Female, Female, 48]* • thanks...although a lot of people would commend Alex on her response to this situation, I think that when you are in a professional environment you should be assertive in a professional manner. After all, your job is your bread and butter and affects your entire family's lifestyle and security. There's absolutely nothing wrong with speaking to someone like HR or management to express your concerns. If it

	was a man I bet he would have not reacted in the same way but would have said something to his coworker or a manager. *[Female, Female, 46]*

Note: The Expresser's Gender, Participant's Gender, and Participant's Age are presented in brackets.

GRAPHS AND FIGURES

Study 1

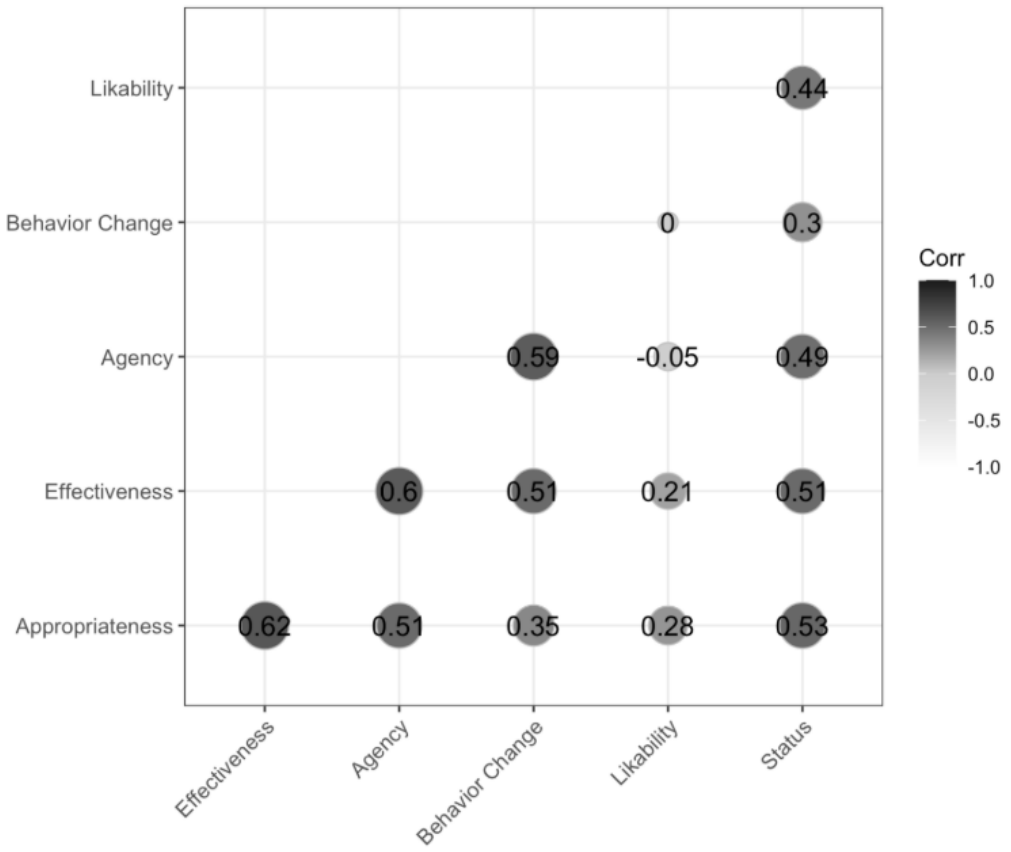
Correlations of Outcome Variables

We examined how participants distinguished outcome dimensions themselves. Because several outcomes were conceptually related, we assessed their intercorrelations using the dataset's continuous variables. This analysis provides a structural view of how participants judge effectiveness, agency, status, and relational measures relating to each other before we compared emotion categories directly.

Figure 1 displays the correlation matrix in a grayscale heat-circle correlation plot, with darker and larger circles indicating stronger positive associations.

Figure 1 ***Correlation Matrix of Key Outcome Variables.***

Figure 1. Correlation Matrix of Key Outcome Variables



Perceived Effectiveness correlated strongly with
Predicted Behavior Change ($r \approx .60$) and Perceived Agency ($r \approx .61$), suggesting that participants' judgements of "what works" in workplace conflict may be closely tied to both behavioral impact and perceived proactiveness and assertiveness.

Perceived Status related moderately to Appropriateness ($r \approx .54$) and Effectiveness ($r \approx .46$).

Likability showed modest positive relations with Appropriateness ($r \approx .30$) and Status ($r \approx .45$), but it's largely independent of Behavior Change.

The overall pattern shows that judgments of "what works" in workplace conflict are partially overlapping with both instrumental and relational appraisals:

Instrumental evaluations (effectiveness, agency, and behavior change) and relational evaluations (status, likeability, and appropriateness) simultaneously contribute to people's judgements of effective behavior outcomes and interpersonal considerations.

Appendix 1

Vignette I

An investment banking team is working on a pitch book for a prospective client who is interested in acquiring a fast-growing startup business. Pitch books are used to sell the client on the firm's ability to help its clients accomplish their objectives - in this case, to successfully purchase the startup business. Because this particular startup is growing so quickly, competition to acquire it is intense. There are many components to pitch books, so the responsibility for creating the different components is distributed to different members of the team. Creating pitch books is generally the responsibility of lower-level members of the team. An associate on the team assigns two first-year investment banking analysts to compile comparable transactions the firm has successfully performed for other clients, including detailed financial information about each transaction. The work is tedious, and the two analysts do not have much time to complete the assignment, so they decide to split the work. The evening before they have to send the information to the associate, Analyst A finds out that Analyst B has barely completed their portion of the assignment. Since Analyst B has already left the office and Analyst A cannot reach them, Analyst A stays all night to complete the assignment. Analyst A manages to complete the task on time.

Vignette II

An investment banking team is working on a pitch book for a prospective client who is interested in acquiring a fast-growing startup business. Pitch books are used to sell the client on the firm's ability to help its clients accomplish their objectives - in this case, to successfully purchase the startup business. Because this particular startup is growing so quickly, competition to acquire it is intense. There are many components to pitch books, so the responsibility for creating the different components is distributed to different members of the team. Creating pitch books is generally the responsibility of lower-level members of the team. An associate on the team assigns two first-year investment banking analysts to compile comparable transactions the firm has successfully performed for other clients, including detailed financial information about each transaction. The work is tedious, and the two analysts do not have much time to complete the assignment, so they decide to split the work. **The evening before they have to send the information to the associate, Analyst B tells Analyst A that they forgot to do their portion of the assignment and cannot stay late because they already made plans with friends, so Analyst A stays all night to complete the assignment.** Analyst A manages to complete the task on time.

Appendix 2

Anger

Response 1:
Analyst A feels angry and tells Analyst B that this behavior is not acceptable. Analyst A tells Analyst B that they are part of a team and team members cannot behave like this. Analyst A emphasizes they want to have a good relationship with Analyst B but also makes it clear that they will not tolerate this behavior in the future.

Response 2:
Analyst A feels angry and yells at Analyst B for not doing their fair share. Analyst A tells Analyst B that they are an irresponsible person and any other member of the team would have done their part. Analyst A threatens to tell their boss if it happens again.

Response 3:
Analyst A feels angry and decides to stop talking to Analyst B. Analyst A gives Analyst B dirty looks when they cross paths and ignores Analyst B's attempts to talk.

Sadness

Response 4:
Analyst A tells Analyst B that they felt sad being left to do all of the work. Analyst A says they thought they were in this together and that Analyst B's behavior made them feel like Analyst B doesn't care about them or their feelings.

Response 5:
Feeling exhausted and let down, Analyst A tells Analyst B that they felt sad being left to do all of the work. Clearly holding back tears, Analyst A says they don't think it was fair for them to have to do the entire assignment.

Response 6:
Analyst A tells Analyst B that they felt saddened and disheartened by Analyst B's behavior. They are part of a team and are in this together. Analyst A says staying up all night made them feel miserable.

No Response

Response 7:
Analyst A chooses not to express their emotions because they don't want to make the situation worse and don't want to be accusatory or ruin their relationship with Analyst B.

Response 8:

Analyst A chooses not to express their emotions because they think doing so won't accomplish anything and would be unprofessional. Analyst A doesn't want to develop a reputation as an overly emotional person.

Response 9:
Analyst A chooses not to express their emotions because they think it would be healthier to simply let it go. Analyst A tries to think about the situation from Analyst B's perspective and decides that, if the situation were reversed, they would want Analyst B to treat them the same way.

Appendix 3

Vignette

An investment banking team is working on a pitch book for a prospective client who is interested in acquiring a fast-growing startup business. Pitch books are used to sell the client on the firm's ability to help its clients accomplish their objectives - in this case, to successfully purchase the startup business. Because this particular startup is growing so quickly, competition to acquire it is intense. There are many components to pitch books, so the responsibility for creating the different components is distributed to different members of the team. Creating pitch books is generally the responsibility of lower level members of the team. An associate on the team assigns two first-year investment banking analysts, Alex and Brian, to compile comparable transactions the firm has successfully performed for other clients, including detailed financial information about each transaction. The work is tedious, and Alex and Brian do not have much time to complete the assignment, so they decide to split the work. The evening before they have to send the information to the associate, Alex finds out that Brian has barely completed his portion of the assignment. Since Brian has already left the office and Alex cannot reach him, **s/he** stays all night to complete the assignment. Alex manages to complete the task on time.

Response: Anger
Alex feels angry and tells Brian that this behavior is not acceptable. **S/he** tells him that they are part of a team and team members cannot behave like this. Alex emphasizes **s/he** wants to have a good relationship with Brian but also makes it clear that **s/he** will not tolerate this behavior in the future.

Response: Sadness
Alex tells Brian that **s/he** felt saddened and disheartened by Brian's behavior. They are part of a team and are in this together. Alex says staying up all night made **her/him** feel miserable.

Response: No Response
Alex chooses not to express **her/his** emotions to Brian because **s/he** thinks doing so won't accomplish anything and would be unprofessional. Alex doesn't want to develop a reputation as an overly emotional person.

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