

The Benefits, Costs, and Paradox of Revenge

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the psychology of revenge. We begin by discussing challenges associated with defining revenge. We then review the relative costs and benefits associated with taking revenge. Although revenge can deter future harm, promote cooperation, and restore avengers' self-worth and power, it can also contribute to conflict escalation and adverse psychological outcomes for avengers, such as depression and reduced life satisfaction. Next, we examine the prevalence of revenge. In distinguishing between the desire for revenge and act of revenge, we challenge the notion that the act of revenge is an automatic or pervasive response to injustice. We highlight four factors that influence whether victims of injustice choose to take revenge: the persistence of anger, perceptions of the costs of revenge, cultural and religious values regarding revenge, and the presence of external systems that can restore justice on behalf of victims.

“Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell” – Hamlet Act 2, Scene 2

Even a cursory review of literature, popular entertainment, religious and legal writings, history, and current events suggests that vengeance is a pervasive and perhaps inevitable response to injustice. The theme of vengeance runs through classic plays and novels (e.g., Iliad, Hamlet, Macbeth, Medea, The Count of Monte Cristo, The Great Gatsby), high and low brow motion pictures (e.g., The Virgin Spring, The Godfather, Kill Bill), and religious writings (e.g., The Law of Talion, Exodus 21:23). Legal systems dating back to The Code of Hammurabi in 1790 BCE seek to curb unbridled or personal vengeance by prescribing socially acceptable forms of punishment. Texts from ancient Greece suggest that many people believed that revenge was natural and sanctioned by the gods (Griffiths, 1991). During the Middle Ages, blood feuds – retaliatory cycles of violence between warring families or clans – were customary, often persisting for generations (Fletcher, 2003). Today, blood feuds occur with considerable frequency in Albania (Lanchin, 2008), China (WuDunn, 1993), India (Majumdar, 2009), Iraq (Raghaven, 2007), Turkey (Rainsford, 2006; Schleifer, 2008), and Yemen (White, 2008), among other countries. In Albania and Yemen alone, revenge killings claimed nearly ten thousand lives in the past decade (Al-Shawtabi, 2008; White, 2008).

Acts of murderous revenge also occur outside of blood feud cultures. Approximately 20% of homicides in the United States are apparently revenge-motivated (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; U.S. Department of Justice, 2006; Wilson & Daly, 1985). For every act of lethal vengeance, there are likely scores of more restrained acts of revenge between workplace colleagues (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002; Wall & Callister, 1995), friends, and family members (Yoshimura, 2007). Many books (e.g., “Don’t get mad, get even: The fine art of revengemanship”; “Up yours: Guide to advanced revenge techniques”) and websites (e.g., boxedrevenge.com; getrevengeonyourex.com; revengeguy.com) offer helpful advice on how to exact revenge. Several

Facebook groups provide victims with the opportunity to divulge unflattering information about their transgressors (e.g., The “Revenge is sweet” group).

Despite this apparent enthusiasm for vengeance, public attitudes toward revenge are mixed. Some consider revenge to be an irrational act that has no place in civilized society (Elster, 1990; Jacoby, 1983). Others portray revenge as both rational and morally justifiable in the face of injustice (Cota-McKinley, Woody, & Bell, 2001; Tripp et al., 2002). Victims of injustice who spurn revenge may be regarded as either saintly or cowardly. Religious texts reflect this bipolar perspective. Revenge is both mandated (e.g., the principle of “an eye for an eye”; Exodus 21:23) and forbidden (e.g., “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”; Matthew 5:38) in most of the major world religions.

In this article, we examine the psychology of revenge. We begin by discussing challenges associated with defining revenge. We argue that there is no clear standard for establishing that an act is motivated by revenge. Revenge is an explanation for behavior based on the perceivers’ attributions for the act. Next, we discuss the physical, social, and psychological costs and benefits associated with taking revenge. We then examine the prevalence of revenge. In distinguishing between the desire for revenge and the act of revenge, we challenge the notion that the act of revenge is an automatic or pervasive response to injustice. We highlight four factors that influence whether victims of injustice choose to take revenge: the persistence of anger, perceptions of the costs of revenge, cultural and religious values regarding revenge, and the presence of external systems that can restore justice on behalf of victims.

Defining Revenge

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines revenge as both an act and a desire. In the act of revenge, individuals respond to a wrong by harming the transgressor. Revenge can also refer to the urge to pay back wrongs; thus, a person can have ‘revenge in his heart’. These definitions distinguish revenge from general aggression and deviance, as well as anger and resentment. Unlike revenge, aggression and deviance do not require a provoking wrong. In contrast to revenge, anger and resentment are exclusively affective rather than behavioral responses to being harmed. Revenge is less easily differentiated from punishment, however, which is defined as a penalty inflicted for a wrongdoing (Punishment, n.d.). Despite definitional similarities, philosophers argue that revenge and punishment can be distinguished by their respective goals (e.g., Zaibert, 2006). Whereas revenge is motivated by a yearning to see a transgressor suffer, punishment is motivated by a desire to improve a transgressor’s future behavior. Unlike revenge, punishment need not be preceded by anger. We emphasize the intention to see the transgressor suffer in our conceptualization of revenge.¹

Some theorists add an additional element to their definition of revenge, arguing that a behavior can be classified unequivocally as revenge only if it involves some cost or risk to the avenger (Cota-McKinley et al., 2001; Crombag, Rassin, & Horselenberg, 2003; Elster, 1990). In a classic tale of revenge, Euripides’ *Medea* murders her husband’s new wife and her own children to avenge his infidelity. This example of revenge is likely so archetypal because of the cost Medea incurs by retaliating. If a mother is willing to kill her own children to see her husband suffer, her motivation is obviously vengeance rather than personal benefit. Nonetheless, other theorists omit this cost component from their conceptions of revenge (Aquino et al., 2001; Stuckless & Goranson, 1992), allowing both

for situations in which avengers incur no cost (e.g., covertly spreading a rumor) or even exclusively benefit from their actions.

An important psychological implication of the various efforts to define revenge is that there is no objective standard for declaring an act to be motivated by revenge or not. Revenge is a label that is ascribed based on perceivers' attributions for the act. Revenge is an inference, regardless of whether the individuals making the inference are the harm-doers themselves, the injured parties, or outsiders. Because revenge is an inference, various individuals can disagree on whether the same action is revenge or not. For example, Osama Bin Laden portrayed the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center as revenge for humiliations dating back to the crusades ("Letter to America", 2002). Conversely, in his address following the attacks, President George Bush depicted the "evil, despicable acts of terror" as attempts to take down "the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world", rather than acts of revenge for past wrongs (e.g., "President's Address", 2001). Our emphasis on revenge as an inference suggests that, rather than debate definitions of revenge, psychologists might more productively study the motivational and contextual factors that lead individuals to label an act as vengeful or not. To date, there has been little research conducted on this topic.

The Benefits of Revenge

Many theorists assert that revenge offers personal and societal advantages. According to evolutionary psychologists, revenge serves three adaptive functions (McCullough, 2008). First, the mere possibility of revenge deters potential transgressors. Individuals with reputations for being vengeful are less likely to be victimized because the potential costs are high. Second, if a transgression does occur, revenge deters further harm by penalizing wrongdoing. Finally, revenge fosters cooperation by preventing individuals from taking advantage of the work carried out by others (free riding). If our ancestors had been able to get away with free riding, those who cooperated in joint efforts, such as hunting or defending the group, would have been disadvantaged. Revenge deters free riding by removing any advantage free riders might have gained.

People's use of revenge to restore justice is also hypothesized to be psychologically beneficial. According to Equity theory (and like formulations), individuals experience distress when they have been treated unfairly (Adams, 1965; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Revenge may enable victims to reduce their distress by restoring equity with the transgressor (Donnerstein & Hatfield, 1982). Similarly, Frijda (1994) observed that one of the most infuriating aspects of being unjustly harmed is the awareness that "he walks in pleasure and I in suffering" (p. 274). Revenge does not undo the harm, but it can restore the balance of suffering between the victim and the transgressor. Revenge can also help restore the balance of power between the victim and the transgressor (Frijda, 1994). By inflicting harm, transgressors imply that their victims are unworthy of respect. Through vengeance, victims can restore their self-worth by showing they are not powerless (Bies & Tripp, 1998; Frijda, 1994).

Researchers have obtained some support for the proposed benefits of revenge. In laboratory studies, the possibility of revenge inhibits the use of monetary and physical penalties. Participants in an economic game fined their partner less when they faced an 80% compared to a 20% chance of revenge (Ford & Blegen, 1992). In another study, individuals who had ostensibly been insulted were provided with an opportunity to administer electric shocks to their insulter. Participants were less punitive when they supposed that their insulter would have the opportunity to seek revenge (Diamond, 1977). Using

computerized tournaments, Axelrod (1984) demonstrated that a tit-for-tat strategy (cooperating after one's partner cooperates, defecting after one's partner defects) was the most effective way to establish and maintain cooperation.

Nisbett and Cohen's (1996) analysis of the culture of honor in the U.S. south provides further evidence for the potential advantages of revenge. Farmers in the south tended to be herders. Because their livestock were expensive and portable and legal protection was limited, southern herders cultivated vengeful reputations to stave off theft. Nisbett and Cohen showed that support for vengeance persists in the American south, even though it has outlived its original purpose.

Finally, Crombag et al. (2003) provided evidence for several of the psychological benefits of revenge. They asked Dutch University students to remember a recent occasion when they felt the urge to even the score after being harmed. Respondents who reported seeking revenge were asked why they acted against their transgressor. The most common response (selected by over half of the revenge seekers) was to show that "nobody walks all over me". The next most common response, accounting for 16% of responses, was restoration of self-esteem. Moreover, revenge seekers did not seem to lament their actions. Seventy-four percent reported feeling satisfied or triumphant after acting vengefully. Only 15% reported experiencing negative feelings, such as regret or shame.

The Costs of Revenge

It is likely that theorists and researchers have focused on the favorable aspects of revenge, in part, because they seek to explain why an apparently negative and disreputable behavior is so common. As the mixed attitudes toward revenge imply, however, revenge also has a dark side, not only for the revenge recipient, but also for the avenger. Although several laboratory studies show that the use of tit-for-tat strategies induces cooperation (e.g., Axelrod, 1984; Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002), these economic games are played between strangers (in reality, often a participant and a computer or computer simulations) who have no pre-existing relationship. Unlike many real-life instances, revenge in these experiments is considered a legitimate and normal part of the game. Moreover, the tit-for-tat strategies used in these games include many cooperative moves in the same context as the retaliatory moves. Isolated retaliatory moves might be less effective at inducing cooperation.

Rather than induce cooperation, revenge might often motivate counter-revenge and prolonged feuds (Kim & Smith, 1993). In a study in which participants reported one revenge incident from the revenge-seekers' perspective and one revenge incident from the transgressors' perspective, revenge-seekers rated the revenge as equitable, whereas transgressors rated the revenge as excessive (Stillwell, Baumeister, & Del Priore, 2008). This gap in perceptions likely contributes to escalating cycles of revenge: Transgressors perceive revenge-seekers' attempts to 'get even' as disproportionately severe and thus deserving of counter-revenge. The cycles of vengeful acts occurring between Israelis and Palestinians, Shi'ites and Sunnis, Hindus and Sikhs, Irish Catholics and Protestants, and Rwandan Tutsis and Hutus, are just a few examples of conflicts in which revenge appeared to beget more rather than less aggression.

In addition, a growing body of research reveals that a vengeful disposition is related to a variety of adverse psychological outcomes. These undesirable outcomes include greater negative affect and depression, as well as reduced life satisfaction (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2007). Strong desires for revenge and greater willingness to act on these desires have also been associated with

post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and psychiatric morbidity (Cardozo, Kaiser, Gotway, & Agani, 2003). In a longitudinal investigation, reductions in revenge motivations on a given day were related to greater life satisfaction, more positive moods, and fewer psychosomatic symptoms the following day (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008).

A set of experimental studies further reveals potential psychological disadvantages of revenge (Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008). Participants who had the opportunity to exact revenge against a free rider in a prisoner's dilemma game experienced greater negative affect and ruminated more about the free rider than those who lacked an opportunity for revenge. The negative affect associated with the opportunity to take revenge in the Carlsmith et al. (2008) studies is seemingly inconsistent with the findings reported by Crombag et al. (2003). Crombag and his associates found that revenge takers reported that they were generally pleased with their actions up to a year later. The studies differ in a host of ways that might account for the apparent contradictions. For example, Crombag and his colleagues conducted a correlational study of remembered events and feelings, whereas Carlsmith and his colleagues conducted an experimental study in which feelings were assessed shortly after the vengeful behavior. Interestingly, when Crombag et al. asked participants to report how much they currently desired revenge (up to a year after the original transgression), those who had taken revenge did not differ from those who had not. Both groups reported little residual vindictiveness.

Finally, revenge motivations predict negative health outcomes. Research on the physiological correlates of revenge and forgiveness revealed that state and trait forgiveness were associated with lower levels of blood pressure and lower heart rate, whereas revenge cognitions and desire to avoid one's transgressor were associated with increased cardiovascular reactivity (Lawler et al., 2005). Moreover, high forgiveness and low revenge were associated with reduced stress and, consequently, fewer illness symptoms.

With a few notable exceptions, most of the research on the costs and benefits of revenge is correlational and thus open to alternative interpretations. Before strong conclusions can be drawn about the relative costs and benefits of taking revenge, there is a need to fill in gaps in the research. At a minimum, however, it seems safe to conclude that a mixed attitude toward revenge seems warranted.

Prevalence of Revenge

If revenge has serious disadvantages, why is it such a common response to victimization? One answer is that revenge is not as prevalent as one might think. We suggest that the perception that revenge is common reflects an availability bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Famous or well-publicized examples of vengeful behavior come readily to mind, leading us to suppose that revenge is common. People's reluctance to exact revenge in the face of victimization is much less salient, as we are often unaware of these cases. It is difficult to determine, for example, how often people who have been unjustly treated forgive their transgressors without contemplating revenge, or how often people experience the urge for revenge in everyday life but do not act on that urge.

Though the evidence is sparse, research suggests that revenge may be more often desired than enacted. We were able to locate three surveys assessing the urge for revenge. The nature of the samples and questions vary, as do the severity and immediacy of the original transgressions. In all three surveys, however, a significant proportion of participants reported experiencing the urge for revenge now or in the recent past. Crombag et al. (2003) found that 64% of their university undergraduate respondents were able to recall an instance in the past year when they felt the urge to avenge a wrong. In a sample

of Kosovar Albanians, nearly half of the respondents displaced by ethnic cleansing reported experiencing strong desires for revenge (Cardozo, Vergara, Agani, & Gotway, 2000). Finally, shortly after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, 90% of Americans surveyed approved of retaliatory attacks in Afghanistan (Newport, 2001). It appears that “revenge in the heart” is a fairly common response to harm.

The data on whether people act on their urge for revenge is still more limited, but intriguing. People who report a desire for revenge after they have been harmed sometimes appear reluctant to act. In the Crombag et al. (2003) study, only 29% of those who felt the urge to seek revenge reported acting on it. In the Albanian sample, only about a third of respondents currently experiencing a desire for revenge indicated that they would definitely act on these feelings if they had the opportunity (Cardozo et al., 2000). The U.S. government was less reluctant to act. Shortly after 9/11, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan.

Although a perceived injustice against oneself or an ingroup member commonly provokes a desire for revenge, people sometimes do and sometimes do not act on this desire. The intriguing psychological question thus becomes: What factors predict whether or not people will actually seek revenge? This is the issue we address next.

Predicting Revenge

A complex set of personal and situational factors influence whether people seek revenge. When individuals perceive that they or members of their ingroups have been unjustly harmed, they experience an array of negative emotions, including anger, sadness, and humiliation (Bies & Tripp, 1996; David & Choi, 2009; Frijda, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005; Williamson & Gonzalez, 2007). Of these emotions, anger is most strongly associated with the urge for revenge (Barber, Maltby, & Macaskill, 2005; Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997; Buss, 1961; Stenstrom, Lickel, Denson, & Miller, 2008). In a study investigating the action tendencies associated with various emotions (including fear, sadness, and anger), Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz (1994) found that participants were particularly likely to report wanting to hurt and get back at someone when they recalled an experience that made them angry. Survey studies reveal that an inclination toward anger in everyday life (e.g., “I have trouble controlling my temper”) is associated with the endorsement of reciprocating negative behavior with more negative behavior (e.g., “If someone treats you badly, you should treat that person badly in return”; Eisenberger, Lynch, Aselage, & Rohdieck, 2004), as well as self-reports of vengeful attitudes and behavior (e.g., “It is important for me to get back at people who have hurt me”; Stuckless, Ford, & Vitelli, 1995; Stuckless & Goranson, 1992).

People high in neuroticism or narcissism easily experience anger and report being more vengeful than those lower in these traits (Brown, 2004; McCann & Biaggio, 1989; McCullough et al., 2001; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). A longitudinal study of reactions to harming demonstrated that neuroticism predicted revenge motivations (“I want him to get what he deserves”) two and a half years after the original offence (Maltby et al., 2008). Angry hostility was the component of neuroticism driving this effect. In addition, individuals high in narcissism report being more vengeful (Brown, 2004) and more aggressive (Twenge & Campbell, 2003) toward someone who rejected them relative to individuals low in narcissism. The link between narcissism and general aggression is mediated by anger (Hibino, Yukawa, Kodama, & Yoshida, 2005).

People who attach great importance to personal and family reputations are also quickly angered by insults and other attacks against their honor (Ijzerman, van Dijk, & Gallucci,

2007). In response to attacks against their honor, these individuals are more aroused (as indicated by an increase in cortisol levels), express a greater desire for revenge (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996; Nisbett, 1993), and are more physiologically primed for aggression (as indicated by a rise in testosterone levels; Cohen et al., 1996). Men, in general, tend to endorse and take revenge more than women do (Cota-McKinley et al., 2001; Crombag et al., 2003; Stuckless & Goranson, 1992), a gender difference also found in tendencies toward aggression (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1980) and punitiveness (Gault & Sabini, 2000).

Finally, experimental research on revenge highlights some contextual factors that influence the degree to which individuals are angered by injustice. People's anger and desire for revenge increase as a function of both offence severity and the ability to identify specific individuals as responsible for a wrongdoing (Aquino et al., 2001; Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; Bies et al., 1997; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006; Stenstrom et al., 2008).

It comes as no great surprise that very angry individuals often feel an urge to take revenge against people they blame for an injustice. More interesting, perhaps, are factors that influence whether angry victims *choose to take* revenge. We next discuss four predictors of revenge behavior: the persistence of anger, perceptions of the costs of revenge, cultural and religious values regarding revenge, and the presence of external systems that can restore justice on behalf of victims.

Transgressions and acts of revenge occur within a social context that includes at minimum two individuals, a transgressor and a victim. The actions of the transgressor can influence the likelihood and severity of revenge, by affecting both the degree of anger and the perceived costs of revenge. If victims become convinced that the transgressions were unintentional, or that their transgressors truly respect and care for them, or that their transgressors are otherwise good people, their anger dissipates and they are less inclined to seek revenge. Researchers using recalled offences, as well as role-played and laboratory victimizations, report that victims are less likely to seek revenge and more likely to forgive when their transgressors apologize for the wrongdoing (Exline, DeShea, & Holeman, 2007; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). Victims are also less likely to take revenge when their transgressors offer some form of compensation. In a prisoner's dilemma game, participants playing against a defecting player were less likely to take revenge by defecting on subsequent rounds when they received an apology coupled with substantive compensation than when they received an apology alone (Bottom et al., 2002). Compensation is valued in part for its own sake, but also because it provides tangible evidence that an apology is sincere (Lazare, 2004; Minow, 1998; Schumann & Ross, 2010).

Even if their anger persists, victims may shun revenge because they fear its negative ramifications. In studies where participants were asked to recall a time they were offended in the workplace, victims who had relatively higher status than their transgressor were generally more likely to report taking revenge than those with lower status (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006; Aquino et al., 2001). Individuals with higher relative status have more resources at their disposal (e.g., money, information, powerful connections) that may minimize the potential negative consequences of taking revenge, such as counter-revenge. Victims of lower status may also find it more advantageous to maintain a relationship with a higher-status transgressor, thus motivating more constructive coping responses than revenge (Aquino et al., 2006). Finally, relationship closeness has also been associated with a greater likelihood of forgiveness and a reduced likelihood of revenge (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; McCullough et al., 1998).

Relationship closeness may have this dampening impact on revenge for a host of reasons. For example, the transgression might be offset by a positive relationship history, the transgressor might be more likely to make amends (Exline et al., 2007), and the victim might rather suffer the injustice quietly rather than threaten the future of a valued relationship.

Social norms, cultural and religious values, and laws can further affect the likelihood of revenge by influencing perceptions of the morality, necessity, and costs of revenge. Acts of personal revenge are more common in cultures of honor where avenging injustices against one's kin is normative and widely accepted (Al-Shawtabi, 2008; Smith, 2008). Victims who shun personal revenge in these cultures risk being perceived as cowards without honor (Cohen et al., 1996; Rainsford, 2006).

Victims who can find religious support for revenge are also more likely to seek vengeance and feel justified in doing so. The final instructions to the hijackers of 9/11 state: "Do not seek revenge for yourself. Strike for God's sake... How beautiful it is for one to read God's words, such as 'And those who prefer the afterlife shall fight for the sake of God'" ("Notes found after Hijackings", 2001). Further, in a set of experimental studies, participants read a story describing violent revenge that was either sanctioned by God or not (Bushman, Ridge, Das, Key, & Busath, 2007). Participants who believed the revenge was sanctioned by God were more aggressive toward a fellow participant; this effect was strongest among those who believed in God and the bible. These experimental studies explored the effects of a violent religious passage on aggression against a nonprovoking partner, but we expect the effects to persist and perhaps be even stronger on vengeful behavior.

Finally, external systems that can penalize the transgressor on behalf of the victim or offer reparations for the injustice also serve to reduce acts of revenge. When victims of injustices in the workplace perceive their organization to have fair grievance procedures, they are more likely to pursue these official channels and less likely to take revenge themselves (Aquino et al., 2006; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). A survey of former political prisoners from the Czech Republic revealed that the more satisfied they were with their financial compensation for wrongful imprisonment, the less they desired revenge (David & Choi, 2009).

In societies with weak rules of law or in subcultures where victims cannot rely on the legal system (e.g., gangs and mafia), personal revenge is often the only means available for restoring justice and honor (Jacoby, 1983; McCullough, 2008). In Albania, for example, the law and order vacuum created by the collapse of communism in 1990 sent many Albanians back to the customary laws of the Kanun, which include the right to murder the killer of one's kin (Smith, 2008). Since the United States and its allies disbanded the Iraqi government in 2003, the number of violent deaths have soared (Burnham, Lafta, Doocy, & Roberts, 2006). Many of these deaths are attributed to acts of revenge between Sunnis and Shi'ites, sectarian violence that was previously kept under control by the oppressive state (McCullough, 2008).

The above findings suggest that, when deciding whether to take revenge, victims weigh various factors, such as the relative benefits and costs, their degree of anger, the deservingness of the transgressor, and other potential options for dealing with the victimization. Rather than an automatic or inevitable response to victimization, revenge is simply one of the available options.

Summary and Conclusions

Personal acts of revenge can be depicted as both frequent and rare. We read the newspaper and watch media reports of acts of horrific violence that are often portrayed as revenge.

Since 2001, the number of suicide bombings – attacks often carried out in the name of revenge – has increased more than tenfold over the previous decade (Atran, 2006). In focusing on these dreadful acts of vengeance, it is perhaps easy to forget that there are many aggrieved people living in the same regions of the world who may experience the urge for revenge but do not act violently. Suicide bombers are the exception in any society, not the rule.

Rather than automatically responding to injustice by lashing out against transgressors, many victims likely compare the relative costs and benefits of taking revenge against those associated with other methods of coping with victimization. Because the disadvantages of taking revenge frequently overshadow the benefits, victims engaging in this comparative analysis often reject vengeance for other actions designed to achieve similar outcomes. Instead of choosing violence, some aggrieved people band together to voice their pain and request reparations from transgressing governments or corporations (e.g., African Americans for slavery; Brooks, 1999). Others choose to follow official channels to attain justice, such as the legal system or authorities within their organization (e.g., Aquino et al., 2006). Still others choose to put the harm behind them or forgive the transgressor (e.g., Gorsuch & Hao, 1993). These arguably more constructive forms of achieving justice have been associated with various positive outcomes, such as increased cooperation (e.g., Bottom et al., 2002), psychological health (e.g., Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001); improved affect (e.g., Williamson & Gonzalez, 2007), and relationship repair (e.g., Exline et al., 2007).

Our review highlights the paradox of revenge. The *potential* for vengeance has a unique inhibitory advantage: people are less likely to harm individuals, groups, or nations who possess the power to retaliate (Aquino et al., 2001, 2006; Diamond, 1977; Ford & Blegen, 1992). This inhibitory effect of the potential for revenge is most starkly articulated in the military doctrine of mutually assured destruction that underlies the theory of nuclear deterrence. According to this principle, the potential for nuclear retaliation yields a tense but stable peace. The potential for revenge is primarily beneficial, however, when it eliminates the need for actual revenge. When the potential is realized in action, the consequences can be highly detrimental, whether the protagonists are individuals, groups, or nations.

Short Biographies

Karina Schumann completed her B.A. Honors in Psychology at the University of Guelph in 2006. Now a fourth-year PhD student at the University of Waterloo, her work concerns responses to harming. With Dr. Ross, she is investigating whether and how religious groups differ in their endorsement of revenge, the effects of religion primes on revenge behavior, the ability of revenge opportunities to restore the victim's sense of personal control, and the association between beliefs in the afterlife and tendencies to desire and take revenge. She is also examining how interpersonal and political apologies are structured and the effects these apologies have on the apologizers and apology recipients.

Michael Ross completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto and his PhD at the University of North Carolina. He then accepted a position at the University of Waterloo where he has since authored and co-authored papers on topics as diverse as memory, judgment and decision making, culture, and the effects of reparations for historical injustices. He conducts theoretically driven research on socially significant issues.

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Endnotes

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¹ Several theorists have also distinguished revenge from retribution and retaliation. For discussions of differences among these constructs, see McKee and Feather (2008); Nozick (1981); Stuckless and Goranson (1992); Vidmar (2001).

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