



Careful what you wish for: Fantasizing about revenge increases justice dissatisfaction in the chronically powerless

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ABSTRACT

Victims grappling with transgressions where justice has not been done sometimes resort to fantasizing about revenge. This may particularly be the case among people who are chronically powerless since, by definition, they are often not in a position to get justice when transgressed against. In an experimental design in which all participants ($N = 84$) recalled a highly hurtful and as yet unresolved transgression, participants wrote down a revenge fantasy (or not). As hypothesised, chronically powerless victims who described a revenge fantasy expressed greater dissatisfaction with the extent to which they had got justice for their transgression. The results suggest that, while people might like the idea of revenge, fantasizing about it can be deleterious for the chronically powerless.

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1. Introduction

Personal power—the perception of one's ability to influence others (e.g., Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012)—is a highly valued commodity in human interactions. Indeed, control, a defining feature of power, is in itself a fundamental human need (e.g., Baumeister, 1999). Yet, many people are chronically lacking in power, that is, they perceive that they generally have little or no power in their everyday lives. Chronic powerlessness develops through accumulated and compounding experiences, for example, as a function of continued low economic status, marginalized group membership, physiological factors (e.g., being mentally and/or physically challenged), negative attachment history, dysfunctional reinforcement schedules, and so forth. Repeated exposure to low power experiences leads individuals to internalize such experiences, to the point that their perceptions of and responses to power-relevant situations are filtered through a lens of low chronic power (see Anderson et al., 2012).

Effects of chronic power are complex and often contingent upon moderating situational variables (for a review see Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). However, as a general rule, a chronic lack of power tends to be associated with negative psychological states (e.g., Yang, Jin, He, Fan, & Zhu, 2015). A particularly deleterious consequence of being chronically powerless is that one is less likely to have access to justice or get justice following victimization (e.g., Rhode, 2004). Yet, justice is fundamentally important to humans (Lerner, 1980). As such, the spectre of justice dissatisfaction looms large for the chronically powerless.

The chronically powerless are vulnerable to the ego-threats posed by transgressions (Henry, 2009), and their own experiences often lead them to conclude that power is to be used for derogatory, controlling purposes (e.g., Kipnis, 1976). Thus, when the chronically powerless can respond to transgressions, the default setting tends to be aggressive rather than inclusive or restorative. When they find themselves possessing episodic power, they tend to use it in an authoritarian manner, including acting vengefully when they perceive that they are able to get away with it (for a brief review, see Strelan, Weick, & Vasiljevic, 2014).

In short, victims with low chronic power are more likely than those with high chronic power to experience justice dissatisfaction following a transgression. Moreover, if they could get justice, the response would likely be retaliatory; in other words, for the chronically powerless, revenge is a preferred and desirable response. Revenge is not the same as justice (see Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2012), however, for many people a vengeful act achieves justice (e.g., Strelan & Van Prooijen, 2013).

What do people do if they desire revenge but cannot get it? Empirical evidence indicates that when victims are unable to get revenge, they may resort to fantasizing about it. Victims are known to fantasize about revenge in a wide range of contexts, including in organizations (Bies & Tripp, 1996) and intimate relationships (Crombag, Rassin, & Horselenberg, 2003), among victims of crime (Orth, Montada, & Maereker, 2006) and sexual abuse (Crowder, 1995), and those suffering from PTSD (Horowitz, 2007). Poignantly, many victims who fantasize about revenge may be characterized as lacking chronic power (e.g., abused children; Goodwin, 1988). Yet, as we will see shortly, the consequences of revenge itself are mixed, as are the consequences of revenge fantasies.

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1.1. Revenge

Theorists generally agree that revenge is an endeavour to ‘impose suffering upon those who have made one suffer, because they have made one suffer’ (Elster, 1990, p. 862). Intense negative emotions such as resentment and hatred often drive revenge, such that revenge is characterized not only as ‘pay-back’ but also by a desire to see an offender suffer and—crucially—to gain pleasure from offender suffering (McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013). Nevertheless, revenge also possesses instrumental properties; it has the capacity to communicate several messages, including deterrence (e.g., Gollwitzer, Meder, & Schmitt, 2011) and self-respect (e.g., Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2012).

In terms of interpersonal relationships, the toxic nature of revenge means that it is often counter-productive, leading to a downward spiral of counter-revenge and/or relationship dissolution (McCullough et al., 2013). In terms of intra-psychic outcomes, people expect that revenge will alleviate negative emotions (Boon, Deveau, & Alibhai, 2009), and that it will be satisfying (Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008). However, people are in fact poor forecasters of affect, including in relation to revenge (Boon et al., 2009; Carlsmith et al., 2008). The latter demonstrated across three experimental studies that actually getting revenge makes victims feel dissatisfied for longer, because the process of getting revenge only encourages rumination about the transgressor and the offence.

Other experimental studies have demonstrated that revenge is satisfying only when victims use it to perform a communicative function, that is, to express intolerance of the transgressor's wrongful treatment in order to educate and deter (e.g., Gollwitzer et al., 2011). Importantly, the message underlying revenge is most effective when transgressors understand why retaliation has occurred (Funk, McGeer, & Gollwitzer, 2014) and when offender behavioural change is evident (Boon et al., 2009). In short, revenge is satisfying when the primary motivation is to achieve a particular instrumental goal, but not when it is enacted for its own sake, that is, the pursuit of pleasure.

In the cold light of day, people generally conduct an implicit analysis of the costs and benefits of revenge. They exercise restraint if they conclude that avenging is imprudent (Schumann & Ross, 2010). Yet, making a rational decision to forego revenge leaves victims in a position where transgressions remain unresolved. As we have noted, some victims will subsequently resort to fantasizing about revenge.

1.2. Revenge fantasies, chronic powerlessness, and justice satisfaction

People who fantasize about revenge often do so as a means of re-establishing control in their lives, presuming that esteem will subsequently be improved and negative affect reduced (see Horowitz, 2007) and balance in relationships restored (Boon et al., 2009). In fact, the effects of fantasizing about revenge are equivocal. There is some evidence that revenge imagery may yield a short term positive effect (for a brief review see Seebauer, Fross, Dubaschny, Schönberger, & Jacob, 2014). Conversely, psychotherapeutic observations suggest that revenge fantasies are ultimately futile (Horowitz, 2007).

In any event, the focus of the present study is not on whether revenge fantasies themselves are satisfying but, rather, the extent to which fantasizing about revenge affects chronically powerless victims' satisfaction that they had gotten justice for a transgression. No research has yet addressed this question, let alone the potential interaction between revenge fantasizing and any individual differences variable (such as chronic power) on victims' psychological outcomes.

As we discussed earlier, the chronically powerless are less likely to be able to get justice and therefore are more likely to experience justice dissatisfaction following a transgression. Thus, first, we expected a main effect for chronic power on justice dissatisfaction. Second, we predicted that describing a revenge fantasy (or not) will moderate the relation between chronic power and justice dissatisfaction. As we shall see shortly, revenge fantasies could potentially have an inhibiting or magnifying

effect on the extent to which the chronically powerless subsequently experience justice satisfaction.

In the current study, an expressive writing paradigm was employed (e.g., Esterling, L'Abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999). In this paradigm, participants write at length about emotional and meaningful topics. There is now an extensive body of evidence for the benefits of writing about distressing events (for a review see Esterling et al., 1999). On one hand, revenge fantasies could offer the chronically powerless an alternative reality in which they have the power to get revenge. As discussed earlier, when the chronically powerless perceive that they possess episodic power, they are likely to act aggressively when threatened (e.g., Strelan et al., 2014). An expressive writing paradigm in which revenge can be exacted with no repercussions provides such a context. Altogether, the positive short-term effects of revenge fantasizing (see Seebauer et al., 2014), the fact that people like the idea of revenge (Carlsmith et al., 2008), and the expressive writing literature suggest that if the chronically powerless are unable to actually get revenge, they may find it liberating to instead describe a revenge fantasy.

On the other hand, however, imagining getting revenge is not the same as actually getting revenge. Moreover, the research on the functions of revenge (e.g., Funk et al., 2014) indicates that revenge is only satisfying when it is communicative and offenders understand the intended message. Of course, no such communication can occur when one describes a revenge fantasy in a study. In addition, psychotherapists conclude that revenge fantasies are non-constructive in the long run (e.g., Horowitz, 2007). Further, experimental research on actually taking revenge (e.g., Carlsmith et al., 2008) suggests that, rather than liberation, writing down a revenge fantasy may have the reverse effect, that of re-focusing the victim on the transgression and the fact that they are unable to get justice, thereby encouraging rumination and exacerbating resentment. Thus, writing down a revenge fantasy may only remind the chronically powerless that they are still powerless.

In summary, the weight of the evidence lead us to predict that, rather than empowering the chronically powerless, revenge fantasies serve to only make things worse for them. Specifically, we hypothesised that revenge fantasies magnify the relation between chronic power and justice dissatisfaction, such that writing down a revenge fantasy (relative to a control condition) makes chronically powerless victims experience even greater levels of justice dissatisfaction.

2. Method

The study employed an experimental design. Participants first recalled a highly hurtful transgression. Background measures relating to the transgression were obtained prior to the experimental manipulation, which involved random assignment of participants to either a revenge fantasy or control condition. Dependent measures, as well as the measure of chronic power, were taken post-manipulation.

2.1. Participants

The study was advertised on Crowdfunder, a labour-sourcing platform, seeking participants who had been victims of a transgression about which they were still angry and wanted revenge. Following an a priori power analysis employing G*Power 3 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) based on medium effect sizes, power of .08, and $\alpha = .05$, we recruited $N = 102$ North American participants (paid \$1.50). Following the manipulation check (see results section), data from 84 participants were analysed (56 women, 28 men; $M_{age} = 38$, $SD = 12.20$).

2.1.1. Pre-manipulation materials

Participants responded to several background items concerned with the transgression and the behaviour of the transgressor. These were

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