

Are Attitudes Toward Romantic Revenge Ambivalent?

Reflections on Revenge in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

We explored ambivalence in attitudes toward romantic revenge through content analysis of 85 semi-structured interviews about incidents in which individuals either got even with a romantic partner or wanted to do so but did not. We found considerable evidence of ambivalence, regardless of the type of revenge episode participants were instructed to recall (good, bad, no revenge) as reflected in tendencies for participants to discuss both positive and negative thoughts and positive and negative feelings about getting even and to report a negative temporal shift in their evaluations of their vengeful actions. Possible implications for predicting romantic revenge are discussed.

Keywords: revenge, ambivalence, attitudes, romantic relationships

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The present paper investigated attitudinal ambivalence in avengers' accounts of episodes in which they exacted or wanted to exact revenge against a romantic partner. Our analysis was predicated on the assumption that our ability to predict whether and when intimates will retaliate for harms incurred will be enhanced if we understand people's attitudes toward revenge—in particular, toward revenge in the specific context of romantic relationships—and the degree to which these attitudes reflect conflicting thoughts and feelings about responding in kind to a partner's provocations. The literature on romantic revenge is in its infancy and researchers have not yet turned their attention to examining people's attitudes toward revenge in this context. Our interviews with avengers (and those who wanted to take revenge but did not) thus offer a rich descriptive base well suited for use as a first point of departure in assessing the degree to which people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent.

Attitudinal Ambivalence and (Romantic) Revenge

An attitude is ambivalent when inconsistencies between and/or within its different components result in the co-existence of positive (favorable) and negative (unfavorable) evaluations of the attitude object in question (Conner & Sparks, 2002; Maio, Fincham, & Lycett, 2000; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Although researchers have not yet demonstrated empirically that people's attitudes toward revenge (either viewed generally or considered in a particular context) are ambivalent, both anecdotal evidence and a review of the broader revenge literature are consistent with this possibility. On the one hand, scholarly and lay views commonly portray revenge as morally improper, despicable, and petty (cf., Crombag, Rassin, & Horselenberg, 2003; Murphy, 2000; Uniacke, 2000) and condemn those who seek vengeance as

irrational (cf., Murphy, 2000). On the other, people often enjoy indulging in revenge fantasies (Barreca, 1995), boast of their vengeful exploits (Uniacke, 2000), and approve of others' efforts to repay harm with harm (Uniacke, 2000). Moreover, research shows that, under certain conditions, people find considerable aesthetic appeal in acts of revenge (Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002).

Ambivalence is most likely to result when an attitude object produces both strong negative and strong positive evaluations (Conner & Sparks, 2002; Thompson et al., 1995). In the case of revenge, acts of revenge directed toward romantic partners may be especially likely to generate such conflicting evaluations. On the one hand, social norms proscribing revenge are likely to be even stronger when the target of retaliation is a loved other and, given the high value and priority placed on romantic relationships in our culture, perhaps particularly so when that other is a romantic partner. Not only does revenge in a romantic relationship violate the most basic moral imperatives urging us to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," it also violates the prescription that intimates should put each others' interests ahead of their own. In addition, the costs associated with choosing to respond vengefully (e.g., dissolution of the relationship, significant disruption to one's social network) may be substantial when the target of revenge is a romantic partner. Such costs may stand in their own right as impediments to getting even in romantic relationships (cf. Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Lagerspetz, 1994) and thus contribute to a negative orientation toward vengeance in this context.

At the same time, individuals may also experience greater distress and pain when their romantic partners cause them harm than when they encounter harm at the hands of another. As Miller (1997) argues, our closest relationship partners have the power—and the opportunity—to hurt us in ways that less intimate others rarely do. Moreover, because most individuals expect

their romantic partners to treat them in ways that honor the special place they believe they should hold in their partners' hearts, breaches of good relational conduct may pose potent threats to individuals' convictions that their partners love them (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Provocations involving romantic partners may therefore constitute significant signals of relational devaluation that severely challenge a person's sense of self-worth (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; Murray et al., 2006). People may thus perceive a romantic partner's wrongdoing as a greater contravention of social norms or relationship rules than provocations perpetrated by strangers or other members of their social networks (cf. McLean Parks, 1997). They may, accordingly, experience heightened desires for revenge in response to provocations that occur in their romantic relationships compared to provocations occurring in interactions with others and thereby come to view a vengeful response to such acts as legitimate, acceptable, and morally appropriate.

Evidence that people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent may have a number of implications for predicting whether and when intimates will respond in kind to a partner's breach of good behavior. First, attitudes high in ambivalence may be subject to greater variability over time and changing circumstance than attitudes low in ambivalence (Conner & Sparks, 2002), thus rendering the task of correctly forecasting an individual's response to a partner's injury or wrongdoing more difficult than otherwise. Theorists generally assume that attitudes high in ambivalence are weaker than attitudes low in ambivalence (e.g., Conner & Sparks, 2002; Jonas, Broemer, & Diehl, 2000) and that temporal stability is associated with greater attitude strength (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). The more ambivalent their attitudes toward returning harm for a partner's harm, then, the more people may shift over time and varying context between tendencies to endorse revenge as an appropriate and acceptable response to a

partner's provocations and tendencies to reject it as inappropriate and unacceptable. As the same person may thus experience, express, and/or enact very different orientations toward romantic revenge on different occasions, anticipating his or her response to perceived relational provocations may prove a difficult and complex undertaking.

Second, evidence that people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent might lead us to expect that, under the right circumstances (e.g., a particularly potent provocation), even those who hold strong, principled objections to revenge might be induced to act on the urge to retaliate. In this case, simple personality measures assessing individuals' overall attitudes toward revenge (such as the Vengeance Scale, Stuckless & Goranson, 1992) may be of limited utility in predicting who will and who will not strike back in the aftermath of a partner's provocation. The idea of repaying an intimate's harm with further harm may well violate such individuals' core values and beliefs; nevertheless, the presence of contradictory, pro-vengeance thoughts and/or feelings in their attitudes toward romantic revenge may yet permit them to conceive ways in which a vengeful response could, for example, produce constructive outcomes (e.g., encourage empathy on the partner's part), be construed as justified and legitimate (i.e., an appropriate response to a wrongful act), or "feel good" (i.e., as serving to repair mood in the wake of the provocation). Given the right circumstances, such thoughts and feelings might prompt even those who strongly oppose the taking of revenge to enact a vengeful gesture.

Finally, research shows that, when people's attitudes are ambivalent, contextual cues in the situation can prime the favorable or the unfavorable aspects of their attitudes in relative isolation from each other, resulting in corresponding changes in their orientations toward the attitude object. For example, in Bell and Esses's (1997) study, participants with ambivalent attitudes toward Native Canadians reported more favorable attitudes toward this target group

when primed with a positive as compared to a negative mood. Should the present investigation uncover evidence of ambivalence in people's attitudes toward romantic revenge, these findings suggest that a consideration of the context in which an individual experiences the urge to retaliate against an intimate's provocation may prove critical to predicting whether he or she resists or—alternately—yields to that urge.

The Present Study

The goal of the present analysis was to explore the possibility that people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent. It thus constitutes the first step in a program of research designed to investigate the possibility that ambivalent attitudes toward romantic revenge lead to the implications discussed above.

The data employed in this analysis were obtained as part of a study investigating the parameters of revenge in romantic relationships, patterned after similar investigations of revenge in the workplace¹ (Bies & Tripp, 1998; Tripp & Bies, 1997). As in this earlier research, we randomly assigned participants to one of three interview conditions. Revenge participants described a time when they “got even” with a romantic partner. Half received instructions to recall episodes in which they considered revenge “good;” the other half received instructions to recall episodes in which they considered revenge “bad.” No revenge participants described a time when they wanted to get even with a romantic partner but chose not to. For the present analysis, assignment to the various conditions served the important purpose of permitting us to examine whether attitudinal ambivalence was more or less common in participants' interviews as a function of the nature of the revenge episodes they recalled.

Our reading of the ambivalence literature led us to expect to observe at least two classes of evidence of ambivalence in the resulting interviews. First, recall that ambivalence exists when

an individual holds both positive and negative evaluations of an attitude object. Because attitudes consist of both cognitive and affective components (Zanna & Rempel, 1988) and given that ambivalence may exist both within and between components (Thompson et al., 1995), ambivalence has often been operationalized in terms of the presence of *mixed or conflicting thoughts and/or feelings* toward the attitude object (Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2005; Maio et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 1995). We thus coded participants' interviews for evidence of *mixed or conflicting thoughts about revenge* and *mixed or conflicting feelings about revenge*² in their reflections on the episodes of romantic revenge they recalled.

Second, we coded for evidence of *temporal instability* in revenge participants' talk about revenge and, in particular, the possibility that they might report a *negative shift over time* in their assessments of revenge. A majority of the participants in Crombag et al.'s (2003) study reported experiencing feelings of satisfaction or triumph in the aftermath of getting even with an interaction partner. However, nearly 70% of those who got even indicated that they still experienced vindictive feelings toward the person who had provoked them. Crombag et al. interpreted these findings as evidence that the satisfaction accompanying the act of taking revenge is relatively short lived. Consistent with this interpretation, Yoshimura (2007a) found that ratings of negative emotions were significantly higher than ratings of positive emotions when people were asked to think about the emotions they experienced in the aftermath of acts of revenge they had undertaken in the past. Together, the results of these two studies suggest that people's evaluations of acts of revenge in which they have engaged may be subject to change over time and thus provide a warrant for exploring the possibility that our participants might recall such change in their interviews.

Method

Participants

Ninety-six undergraduate psychology students (46 males, 50 females) from a large university in western Canada were recruited for a study on revenge in romantic relationships (Author, Author, & Author, 2009; Author, Author, & Author, 2011). Participants received partial course credit. Six individuals did not complete the interview because they could not think of a revenge episode to recall. We dropped an additional five participants prior to analysis (one due to interviewer error; the remaining four because they failed to follow instructions). The remaining 85 participants (42 males, 43 females) ranged in age from 18 to 42 ($M = 22.60$, $SD = 4.24$) and reported Caucasian (56.50%), Asian (34.10%), and other (9.40%) ethnicities. Sixty-four participants (75.3% of the final sample) were involved in romantic relationship at the time of the study. However, only 32 (37.6%) were currently involved with the partner with whom they had gotten even/wanted to get even. The length of the target relationships ranged from one month to 20 years ($M = 26.79$, $SD = 31.94$).

Procedure

Using a methodology adapted from Tripp & Bies (1997), we randomly assigned participants to recall one of three types of revenge episodes: (a) an incident in which they got even with their partners and believed then or believed now that it was good to get even (revenge-good), (b) an incident in which they got even with their partners and believed then or believed now that it was bad to get even (revenge-bad), or (c) an incident in which they wanted to get even with their partners but did not (no revenge). Upon participants' arrival at the laboratory, the interviewer (the third author) reviewed the purpose of the study and then provided participants with instructions that varied by condition. For example, participants in the revenge-good condition were told:

Please tell me of a specific time when you got even with a romantic partner and believed then or believe now that it was good (bad) to get even. If you can think of more than one incident, please choose the episode that was the most significant or memorable to you. Changes in wording for the revenge-bad condition appear in parentheses. For participants in the no revenge condition, the interviewer replaced the first sentence with "Please tell me of a specific time when you wanted to get even with a romantic partner but chose not to."

If participants needed time to think of a revenge episode that matched the instructions they received, the interviewer left the room for a few moments to give them time to reflect. Once participants had a specific instance of revenge in mind, the interviewer asked them to describe the incident in detail. She then asked them a series of questions about the episode to flesh out their stories more fully. Participants in the two revenge conditions were asked to describe the nature of the provocations that elicited their desires for revenge, the precise means by which they "got even" with their partners, and the motives that guided their decisions to retaliate. Depending on the condition to which they had been assigned, revenge participants were also asked to explain why they thought/felt revenge was good (bad). To be thorough, once participants had responded to the condition-specific question concerning whether revenge was good/bad, the interviewer also asked revenge participants to consider the converse: whether there was anything bad (good) about their experience. Participants in the no revenge condition described the provocation, their plans for revenge, and why they decided to forego getting even. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Coding. The first and second authors read each interview transcript independently, inspecting participants' interview responses for evidence of ambivalence in their attitudes toward repaying an intimates' harm with harm. Based on the ambivalence literature, coders identified

instances in which participants reported (a) mixed (i.e., both positive/favorable and negative/unfavorable) thoughts or beliefs about revenge, (b) mixed feelings about revenge,³ and (c) a positive or negative temporal shift in their thoughts and/or feelings about revenge. Cohen's kappa calculated across the three observed classes of ambivalence was .89. Disagreements were resolved via discussion.

Recall that the interviewer asked revenge participants to consider both what may have been good and what may have been bad about getting even with their partners, with the order in which she asked these questions varying by condition (i.e., participants always answered the question specific to the condition to which they had been assigned first). As a means of establishing the extent to which the evidence of ambivalence we observed in our interviews may have resulted from asking participants both questions, a third independent coder (a graduate student not otherwise involved in this research and blind to the results) read each revenge condition interview and determined whether the evidence of ambivalence emerged prior to or only after the point at which the interviewer posed the question that asked participants to reflect on the converse of the perspective to which they had been randomly assigned.

Results

We found considerable support for the notion that participants' attitudes toward revenge in romantic relationships are ambivalent. Fully three-quarters ($n = 64$) of participants exhibited at least one class of evidence of ambivalence in their interview responses and nearly 40% ($n = 33$) exhibited two or more.⁴ More importantly, the third coder identified evidence of ambivalence prior to the second, converse question in 41.4% ($n = 24$) of the 58 interviews in the revenge conditions. Together with the fact that we found evidence of ambivalence in 40.7% ($n = 11$) of no revenge participants' interviews—that is, when the interviewer did not ask the sorts of

questions that might have led participants in the revenge conditions to report mixed thoughts and feelings—this finding strongly suggests that the ambivalence manifest in participants' responses cannot be attributed simply to our decision to ask revenge participants to consider both what might have been good and what might have been bad about taking revenge. Table 1 presents the frequency with which each class of evidence was identified in participants' accounts.⁵

Evidence of Mixed Thoughts and Beliefs About Revenge

Nearly 90% ($n = 51$) of the 58 participants in the revenge conditions reported both positive (favorable) and negative (unfavorable) thoughts and beliefs about revenge. One participant argued, for example, that revenge was good because it "...proved the point that, you know, I can't really be taken advantage of. I'm not just going to sit there and roll over..." but also that revenge was bad because "the evening was ruined, I know she had a bad evening because of it." Another participant asserted that revenge was bad "...because our friendship, from there it kinda declined" but also that revenge was good because "I was showing her my, um, disapproval of what she did to me."

A similar pattern of conflicting thoughts and beliefs about revenge is evident in the words of a male participant who got even with his girlfriend for failing to attend his birthday celebrations two years running. On the one hand, he expressed considerable reservations about the moral probity of taking revenge against "someone you really care about." On the other, he argued that revenge was an effective way to get a response if other measures fail (interestingly, he seemed to experience significant ambivalence about suggesting this latter possibility):

Like, people respond to [revenge], sometimes, more in a relationship, *which is bad*. Like, you know, if you tell them your feelings and then they don't respond to that and acknowledge that, then you have to find some way to do it and oddly that works

sometimes...*Which is bad, you know.* I feel bad that you have to do it that way sometimes. You know, *I don't like to, uh, kinda get back at,* you know. If it's someone you really care about you don't want to do anything mean to them but *sometimes it actually does produce results. You gotta do it I guess,* I don't know. [Here and elsewhere, emphasis added for illustrative purposes.]

Importantly, among those assigned to the revenge condition, assignment to type of revenge episode did not appear to limit participants' ability or willingness to disclose both positive and negative thoughts and beliefs about the episode they recalled. The considerable majority of participants—more than 90% of those in the revenge-good and 80% of those in the revenge-bad conditions—related both favorable and unfavorable thoughts concerning romantic revenge generally or the particular revenge episode they recalled, $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 1.46, ns$.

Finally, a noteworthy minority (22.2%) of no revenge participants discussed reasons they thought revenge was both good and bad (either for relationships in general or for themselves and their own relationships). As we noted previously, the prevalence of contradictory thoughts about getting even in revenge participants' interviews may be attributable in part to the fact that we asked them to tell us what, if anything, made their experiences of revenge good and bad (indeed, as we discussed above, the frequencies with which we observed evidence of ambivalence drop considerably when we restrict our analysis to those parts of the interview that precede the second, converse question). Because they recalled episodes in which they resisted the urge to retaliate, however, we did not pose these questions to participants in the no revenge condition. Accordingly, the ambivalence manifest in the conflicting or contradictory thoughts no revenge participants expressed about repaying a partner's harm with harm or the consequences of doing

so reflect their spontaneous thoughts about getting even and provide strong support for the notion that ambivalence may characterize some people's attitudes toward romantic revenge.

Evidence of Mixed Feelings About Revenge

Mixed feelings about revenge appeared less frequently in participants' interviews than mixed thoughts and beliefs about revenge. Nevertheless, we identified conflicting feelings in approximately one-third of all interviews, including 23 (39.7%) of the 58 interviews with participants who got even and five (18.5%) of the 27 interviews with participants who did not.

Most common in participants' interviews ($n = 13$ or 15.3% of the sample) was the juxtaposition of simple and rather generic claims that participants felt both "good/better" and "bad" about the episode they recounted. For instance, one participant indicated that it "*kind of felt good*" to get even with her boyfriend. However, she also reported that she felt bad ("well, *I felt bad*") when she later discovered that her act of vengeance made her partner feel jealous.

Other combinations of emotions were also observed in participants' revenge accounts. For example, seven participants (8.2%) reported feeling both *good/better* (or equivalent) and *guilty* (e.g., "it makes me feel a little *better* about what happened to me...but at the same time it makes me feel *guilty*"). Five participants' (5.9%) claimed that they felt good but that they also felt *childish* or *immature* about what they had done (e.g., "it made me feel kind of *silly*...but at the same time [it] gave me a bit of *satisfaction*"). In addition, two participants explicitly characterized their feelings about getting even with their romantic partner as *mixed* ("my feelings are kinda mixed on the subject," "kinda like a mixed emotions (sic)").

Recall that mixed thoughts and beliefs were evident in roughly equal proportions of revenge-good and revenge-bad interviews. In contrast, references to conflicting emotions tended to vary in frequency as a function of the type of revenge episode participants were asked to

recall, with reports of mixed feelings appearing marginally more often in interviews with participants in the revenge-bad condition than interviews with participants in the revenge-good condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 3.53, p = .06$.

Finally, although no revenge participants were significantly less likely than participants in the revenge conditions to include references to mixed feelings ($\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 3.73, p = .05$), evidence of mixed feelings about revenge was not restricted to interviews with revenge participants. As indicated above, nearly 20% of participants in the no revenge condition reported both positive and negative feelings with respect to revenge. Interestingly, in each case no revenge participants associated positive feelings with thinking in the abstract about taking revenge but negative feelings with thinking about actually getting even. For example, one participant claimed that “it was *sort of a thrill* to, you know, fantasize about [getting even with his partner]” but that he believed he would have *felt immature* if he had acted on his fantasies.

Evidence of Temporal Shifts in Evaluations of Revenge

In addition to evidence of mixed thoughts and feelings, we also coded for statements implying that participants’ evaluations of their vengeful responses had changed over time. Our review of the literature suggested that reports of negative temporal shifts might be more typical of people’s experiences than reported positive shifts. Nevertheless, we coded for reported shifts in either direction—from good to bad and bad to good—to ensure that we did not rule out either possibility. As can be seen in Table 1, we observed reported temporal shifts in nearly half (25 or 43.1%) of the 58 interviews with participants in the revenge condition (with revenge-bad participants marginally more likely than revenge-good participants to report such shifts, $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 3.45, p = .06$) as well as one (3.7%) of the 27 interviews with participants in the no revenge condition. In every case the reported shift was negative.

Consider the following participant who got even with his girlfriend by having a one-night stand. In his words, “*Right at that instant* I felt good, like, you know, it’s, like, alright. You know I’m the boss kind of thing. But *then, afterward, I felt bad*. That was the wrong decision—I recognize that.” In response to catching her boyfriend in bed with another woman at a party, another participant keyed her boyfriend’s car and broke his favorite fishing rod. She told us:

At the time it felt really good to key his car and get back at him. It was just, like, this is what you get, bastard. But *a couple weeks later I felt bad. I felt really guilty*. I was just, like, oh, maybe I should pay for [the damage to the car].

At least three participants appeared to connect the reported temporal shift in their evaluations of their vengeful actions with having had time to think about the situation and to recognize, for example, that their responses were of dubious moral value or that (in their views) they had acted irrationally or illogically in choosing to repay harm with harm. For example, one participant noted that as “*soon as you put a bit of logic into it* then that’s when it doesn’t feel so good.” Another participant expressed similar thoughts in explaining why he had chosen not to get even with his partner:

After you’ve had, like, a night to sleep on it and it’s, like, *you start thinking about it more that’s when you decide, like, it’s not, like, such a good idea*. You think about, like, the actual long term effect of what you’re going to do whereas, like, the short term is, like, this is what I want to do and that’s it.

The latter participant’s focus on the long-term consequences associated with taking revenge suggests that having—or taking—the time to reflect on the probable consequences of acting vengefully may precipitate a shift in evaluative position regarding the wisdom and/or appropriateness of exacting revenge. This possibility is further supported by the words of a

participant who got even with her boyfriend by cheating on him, but then decided not to tell him what she had done:

I wanted him just to feel the same way I did at the time because it hurt, right? But *I thought about the consequences* so I decided not to tell him more...It probably makes you feel good if, say, the person would find out, like, right away sort of thing. But then *the consequences after aren't worth it* sort of thing.

According to the version of events she provided in her interview, this participant seems to have taken revenge thinking that responding vengefully to her partner's provocation would be a good idea. However, after acting on the urge to retaliate, she appears to have recognized the possible negative consequences associated with her actions and subsequently decided that taking revenge might not have been such a wise move, after all.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to explore the possibility that people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent. The revenge literature, societal discourses surrounding revenge, and cultural beliefs and mores concerning intimate relationships provide credible grounds for believing that people might view taking revenge as inappropriate in the context of romantic relationships, if not morally wrong in any situation. At the same time, the same cultural beliefs and mores that lead people to condemn acts of revenge between romantic partners may also cause them to experience their partners' provocations as potent threats to cherished beliefs that their partners love and care for them, as well as contraventions of deeply-held assumptions concerning the ways romantic partners should treat each other. Accordingly, people's attitudes toward romantic revenge may contain conflicting and contradictory elements that simultaneously advocate and oppose getting even in romantic contexts.

Consistent with this reasoning, our analysis provided a range of support for the notion that people harbor ambivalent attitudes toward acts designed to "even the score" when such acts occur in the context of (current or former) romantic relationships. For example, we found broad evidence that, when asked to reflect on instances in which they had engaged in acts of romantic revenge (or wanted to do so), participants' thoughts and beliefs about and emotional responses to the episode were often mixed and contradictory in nature. In addition, we found evidence of self-reported negative temporal shifts in evaluative orientations toward revenge in approximately 30% of interviews. That is, a noteworthy minority of participants described initially feeling good about getting even with their partners—or initially thinking that doing so was a constructive response to the harm their partners had caused them—but later coming to feel bad about their actions (or fantasies) or coming to view getting even as "the wrong thing to do." We found no evidence of the reverse shift in participants' accounts.

Why might participants report shifting attitudes toward revenge over time and, in particular, why might they report shifts in a negative direction? Assuming participants' statements describing such a shift accurately reflect their actual experiences (i.e., assuming the shifts were real rather than merely perceived or reported), one possibility is that participants' initial orientations toward revenge may have been driven more by considerations of the painfulness and illegitimacy of the provocation than complementary considerations concerning getting even. The majority of our participants (61% of those who provided an answer to the question about the amount of time that elapsed between the provocation and the revenge behavior) who acted on their desires for vengeance (revenge participants) or simply thought about seeking revenge (no revenge participants) did so within a very short period of time following the offense or injury that sparked their desires to begin with (often moments or hours

after their partners' provocations and, with a small number of exceptions, almost always within a day or two). In the more or less immediate aftermath of the provocation, the unjustness of the harm incurred, the magnitude of suffering experienced, and the degree to which their partners' actions violated social norms concerning appropriate behavior among intimates may have consumed much or all of participants' attention. In contrast, they may have been much slower to reflect on the social norms proscribing revenge (either in general or against romantic partners in particular), the legitimacy and morality of returning harm for harm in the given circumstances, and issues such as the potential negative consequences associated with retaliating and whether other responses might have been more appropriate and effective.

Another possibility, of course, is that participants who reported such shifts in their orientations toward revenge may have changed their views about getting even because the consequences of their decisions to avenge themselves proved negative in the long run (i.e., depending on the circumstances that follow, the act of taking revenge may itself create ambivalence). The finding that participants who reported a temporal shift in their evaluations of revenge inevitably reported negative consequences associated with getting even is consistent with this possibility.⁶

Whatever the explanation, the reported temporal shift observed in some interviews may suggest the existence of an important disconnect between immediate affect-oriented responses and later cognitive responses to revenge. Put differently, people's initial affective responses to revenge may be somewhat independent of their later cognitive evaluations of their vengeful actions. If so, individuals might be more likely to seek revenge against a current or former romantic partner directly after a provocation (when emotional reactions to the offense may dominate decision-making processes) than if they take time to think about the event and the

probable consequences associated with evening the score. This notion is in line with Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon's (2002) investigation of the forgiveness of betrayals in romantic relationships, which revealed immediate responses to betrayal to be more negative than later responses (see also Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991).

In sum, the present findings support contentions in the revenge literature that people's attitudes toward revenge are mixed or ambivalent (e.g., Crombag et al., 2003; Tripp et al., 2002; Uniacke, 2000). Consistent with arguments that revenge is neither universally condemned nor condoned (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988) and that it can serve both constructive and destructive ends (e.g., Tripp & Bies, 1997), participants expressed both favorable and unfavorable attitudes toward revenge as reflected in the content, evaluative tone, and the reported temporal consistency⁷ of their thoughts and feelings about getting even with their (current or former) romantic partners.

As a noteworthy aside, some participants seemed to experience considerable dissonance as a result of having retaliated against (or having wanted to retaliate against) their romantic partners. Coders did not begin the coding process with the intention of seeking evidence of such dissonance; nevertheless, so striking were examples of attempts at dissonance reduction in some participants' talk that coders elected to track such instances, identifying fourteen (24.1%) interviews with revenge participants and four interviews (14.8%) with no revenge participants (n = 18 or 21.1% of the full sample) in which participants explicitly asserted that getting even was uncharacteristic of their nature or that they normally refrain from responding vengefully (e.g., "I felt really bad because *it's not like me* to get even with someone..." "It was *pretty extreme for me* because *I'm not like that*...For me to lie to somebody and to, not cheat on him but, like, to deliberately go see my ex-boyfriend was *really bad for me*.").

We find these instances particularly intriguing because all but two ($n = 16$ or 88.9%) of the participants who made such claims also displayed ambivalence of one kind or another. In short, although it seems clear that these individuals viewed romantic revenge with considerable disdain—as revealed in the fact that they openly distanced themselves from their vengeful actions (or desires)—the majority nevertheless evinced some pro-revenge thoughts and/or feelings in their interview responses.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

As we argued previously, the finding that people may hold ambivalent attitudes toward romantic revenge may have a number of important implications for our understanding of revenge in romantic relationships. First, to the extent that individuals' attitudes toward romantic revenge are more ambivalent than univalent, their evaluative orientations toward avenging a partner's wrongs may be subject to fluctuation over time and changing context. We should thus expect some degree of instability in people's judgments concerning the moral probity of acts of romantic revenge they have committed or observed and some variability across time and circumstance in their willingness to engage in revenge against an intimate partner, themselves.

Second, in part because people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are likely to demonstrate instability if they are ambivalent, predicting whether and when people will respond to a romantic partner's injuries or offenses in a retaliatory fashion may prove a difficult task. To the degree that attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent, the link between attitudes and behavior may be more tenuous than were such attitudes more uniform in nature (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Additional research will be needed to investigate, for example, the situational and contextual variables that determine whether and when an individual's pro- or anti-revenge

thoughts and feelings dominate the decision-making process in the aftermath of a given provocation.

Third, if people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent, we may have greater power to alter their behavior in response to perceived provocation than otherwise, provided interventions and educational campaigns aimed at reducing people's inclinations to repay a partner's harm with harm are successful in drawing people's attention to their anti-revenge feelings and beliefs (Armitage & Conner, 2000; Bell & Esses, 1997; Hass, Katz, Rizzo, Bailey, & Eisenstadt, 1991; Katz & Hass, 1988). Of course, the reverse may be equally true—people may be moved more readily in the direction of taking action to “even the score” if their attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent and an agent of social influence primes their pro-revenge feelings and beliefs. Further research is necessary to investigate these possibilities.

Fourth, the dissonance findings we reported above lend support to our earlier contention that measures of dispositional vengefulness or attitudes toward revenge may prove of limited utility in predicting who will and will not retaliate in intimate contexts—at least when people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent. These findings clearly indicate—as decades of dissonance research (for a review see Wood, 2000) have done before—that people sometimes act in ways counter to their attitudes. Future research might explore whether such counter-attitudinal behavior is more likely among those whose attitudes are ambivalent.

Finally, the fact that we observed evidence of ambivalence in both revenge conditions (if, for some classes of ambivalence, with somewhat greater frequency among revenge-bad participants than among revenge-good participants) despite instructing participants to recall different kinds of events, indicates that simple efforts to frame a revenge episode as “good” or “bad” do not restrict people's thoughts to those aspects of their experiences that conform to the

framing they have encountered. This suggests that theoretical perspectives on revenge in romantic relationships (and perhaps in other domains) which fail to capture the more nuanced and sometimes conflicting nature of people's thoughts and feelings about this important social phenomenon may be flawed in important ways. The present findings, and earlier theoretical speculations, suggest that beliefs that revenge is petty, irrational, and morally repugnant may often co-exist with tendencies to see justice in victims retaliating against their harm-doers, to appreciate acts of romantic revenge in which perpetrators appear to get what they deserve, and to believe that certain kinds of offense or injury call for a vengeful response. As evidence that people's attitudes toward romantic revenge are ambivalent continues to accumulate, theories will need to acknowledge that people's attitudes toward repaying a partner's harm with harm may be conflicting and dualistic in nature.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study merit discussion. First, roughly two-thirds of our participants recalled revenge episodes that occurred in former romantic relationships. This is potentially problematic because attitudes toward revenge exacted against current partners may be more ambivalent than attitudes toward revenge exacted against past partners if for no other reason than that the social norms proscribing revenge are likely to condemn the former more than the latter. To the extent that expectations and standards for behavior are more stringent for persons in relationships than for persons who are not, the end of the relationship might be seen to "release" the ex-partner from obligations to uphold such expectations and thus diminish proscriptions against getting even that could otherwise create ambivalence.

In the context of the present investigation, this logic would suggest that our findings might substantially underestimate the degree of ambivalence characteristic of people's attitudes

toward romantic revenge because our sample disproportionately discussed revenge episodes from past relationships. Chi-squared tests, however, provided no evidence that ambivalence varied as a function of relationship status. Moreover, in contrast to the logic above, the one significant difference that emerged concerned participants' tendency to distance themselves from their vengeful actions and revealed that individuals reflecting on revenge episodes in past relationships (26.9%) demonstrated an enhanced—not a diminished—tendency to engage in dissonance reduction compared to those reflecting on revenge episodes in ongoing relationships (9.4%), $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 3.80, p = .05$.

The retrospective nature of our interview data also poses challenges to the interpretation of our results, particularly in light of conclusions we wish to draw about the temporal stability of people's attitudes toward revenge as reflected in their interview responses. The problem is not only that participants' memories for the events they discussed may be subject to distortion due to the passage of time, but also that certain kinds of incidents may have occurred in the interval between the revenge episode and the time of the interview that might have affected their memories of the episode in question and of their attendant cognitive and affective responses (e.g., the offending partner may have apologized for the provocation or the participant may have had recent contact with the partner and realized how much suffering the partner experienced as a result of his or her decision to retaliate).

We also recognize that, in comparison with a methodology that posed no such questions to participants, our decision to ask revenge participants to consider both what may have been bad and what may have been good about revenge may have inflated the odds that we would observe ambivalence in their responses. It is worth noting, however, that other ways of assessing ambivalence are at least as direct in focusing participants' attention on both the positive and

negative aspects of their attitudes toward the attitude object under investigation as our interview questions were. For example, based on Kaplan's (1972) approach to operationalizing ambivalence, Thompson and Zanna (1995; Thompson et al., 1996), asked participants to think about and evaluate both the positive and negative qualities of the various attitude objects they studied. We contend, therefore, that the methodology we employed in our interviews was no more "leading" than other methods commonly used in the ambivalence literature.

Finally, future research should examine the extent to which ambivalence may be observed in people's attitudes toward revenge in contexts other than romantic relationships, including other types of relationships (i.e., between friends or family members, among co-workers, etc.) and interactions between strangers. The present analysis was predicated on the assumption that romantic relationships constitute an ideal context for investigating attitudinal ambivalence toward revenge because social norms proscribing retaliation may be especially strong when the target is a romantic partner and yet a romantic partner's wrongdoings may carry more potential to cause pain, anger, and bitterness than wrongdoings committed by other classes of harm-doer. Much of the same logic, however, could be applied to attitudinal ambivalence toward revenge in the context of relationships between family members (perhaps especially between parents and children). Research examining acts of revenge in other relational and non-relational contexts would address a number of theoretically significant questions including: Are people's attitudes toward revenge equally ambivalent regardless of the interpersonal context in which the provocation occurs? Or does the type of relationship between parties affect the degree of ambivalence individuals display?

Conclusion

In spite of its limitations, the results of the present investigation suggest that people's attitudes toward revenge—at least as it takes place in romantic relationships—may be more mixed and conflicting than most theorists and researchers have yet recognized. Our findings add to the small body of literature which argues that people variously condemn and condone acts of vengeance (Barreca, 1995; Crombag et al., 2003; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Tripp et al., 2002; Uniacke, 2000). They also highlight the need for research designed to test the implications of such ambivalence for predicting if and when people will respond in kind to a partner's wrongdoing. Revenge is a phenomenon of universal human significance, with the potential to cause great harm and—as some have argued—the potential to benefit social relations, as well (Bies & Tripp, 1998; Yoshimura, 2007b). We hope that our results will inspire others to examine revenge—especially in the context of important social relationships—and further explore the dualistic nature of people's attitudes toward repaying harm with harm.

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Footnotes

¹ For reasons that are unclear, there is a comparatively large literature on revenge in this domain, whereas the literature on revenge in romantic relationships (or, indeed, in other non-workplace domains) is tiny.

² We did not code independently for the presence of intercomponent ambivalence because the simultaneous presence of both conflicting thoughts and conflicting feelings about revenge entails the presence of conflict between thoughts and feelings about revenge (i.e., if a participant discusses both positive and negative beliefs about revenge and both positive and negative feelings about revenge, s(he) necessarily expresses conflicting thoughts and beliefs about revenge in the sense that, for example, s(he) expressed both positive beliefs and negative feelings toward revenge).

³ We did not require that the mixed thoughts and feelings appear contiguous to each other in the interviews to be considered evidence of ambivalence. Rather, if a participant expressed anti-revenge sentiments (for example) at one point in the interview and pro-revenge sentiments elsewhere, we coded that as evidence of mixed thoughts.

⁴ Of the 33 participants whose interviews contained multiple classes of ambivalence, the majority ($n = 21$ or 63.6%) demonstrated intercomponent ambivalence (i.e., conflicting thoughts and feelings about revenge). See Table 1.

⁵ We conducted X^2 tests to determine whether the observed frequencies for the three classes of ambivalence varied as a function of participant sex or the status (current vs. past) of the romantic relationship in which the revenge episode occurred. No differences approached significance.

⁶ Based on the results of a series of experimental studies, Carlsmith, Wilson, and Gilbert (2008) have argued that people's expectations concerning the outcomes of revenge are flawed in that they expect to feel better after punishing a perpetrator than they actually do. Although the present findings might be viewed as congruent with this argument, the fact that a noteworthy minority of no revenge participants anticipated negative outcomes if they were to act on their urges to retaliate suggests that not all people believe that punishing a perpetrator leads to positive outcomes.

⁷ In a study examining attitudes toward eating a low fat diet, Armitage and Connor (2000, Study 1) found no evidence that ambivalence predicted attitude stability. Our study differs from their study, however, in examining participants' attitudes toward specific incidents in which they had engaged or not engaged in the behavior under investigation (Armitage and Connor measured the stability of attitudes and intentions over time, without reference to a particular act or incident). Our study also takes a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to assessing stability. In any case, the Armitage and Connor findings highlight a lack of consistency in the literature regarding the link between ambivalence and stability (see Armitage and Connor for a review).

Table 1

Proportion of Participants (by Condition) Who Demonstrated Each of the Classes of Ambivalence in Their Interview Responses

Class of ambivalence	Good (<i>n</i> = 29)	Bad (<i>n</i> = 29)	No Revenge (<i>n</i> = 27)	Total (<i>n</i> = 85)
Mixed thoughts	93.1/48.3 (27/14)	82.8/34.5 (24/10)	22.2 (6)	67.1/35.3 (57/30)
Mixed feelings	27.6/24.1 (8/7)	51.7/20.7 (15/6)	18.5 (5)	32.9/21.2 (28/18)
Conflicting thoughts and feelings	27.6/24.1 (8/7)	44.8/20.7 (13/6)	0 (0)	24.7/15.3 (21/13)
Temporal shift (good to bad)	31.0/17.2 (9/5)	55.2/27.6 (16/8)	3.7 (1)	30.6/16.5 (26/14)
Overall	93.1/48.3 (27/14)	89.7/34.5 (26/10)	40.7 (11)	75.3/41.2 (64/35)

Note. For the Good, Bad, and Total columns, values before the slash were calculated collapsing across participants' responses to the two questions asking what was good and bad about getting even (i.e., disregarding the point in the interview at which such responses were identified).

Values after the slash were calculated using only those instances of ambivalence that occurred in the interview prior to the point at which participants were asked the second of these questions (i.e., the question addressing the converse of the condition to which participants had been assigned). Frequencies appear in parentheses below percentages.