

To avenge or not to avenge? Psychologists dig deeper into how people see revenge and those who do it

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Revenge is often considered to be socially inappropriate and morally blameworthy—a type of "wild justice." Most people agree that revenge

is morally wrong. On the other hand, people do enjoy stories in which the victim takes effective revenge against the perpetrator. In addition, previous findings have also confirmed that, by design, people approve of revenge.

Thus, the research team of Prof. Karolina Dyduch-Hazar (Julius-Maximilians-University of Würzburg, Germany) and Prof. Dr. Mario Gollwitzer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany) explored whether it is indeed the act of [revenge](#) that people morally condemn or rather the pleasure the avenger might experience.

After conducting a series of four [surveys](#): three with carefully selected groups of undergraduate students from Poland, and one with a similarly configured selection of American adults, the scientists report curious nuances between situations where perpetrators demonstrated pride about taking revenge in contrast to cases where they experienced pleasure; as well as cases where the survey participants are put in the shoes of an imaginary avenger vs. where they are mere observers.

In their [study](#), published in the open-access journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*, the team did confirm that even though people who are taking revenge might be endorsed, they are nonetheless morally condemned compared to people who opted to not avenge.

Curiously, when the survey participants evaluated hypothetical situations where the avengers demonstrated satisfaction about their act, they assigned them traits, such as greater competence (meaning confidence, ability, efficiency) compared to imaginary people who felt bad about having taken revenge on their wrongdoers, or those who did not avenge at all.

Here, the researchers explain, the revenge and the following satisfaction are seen rather as evidence of the actor being capable of achieving a

goal.

On the other hand, when the imaginary avengers were described as experiencing pleasure, the survey participants saw them as particularly immoral.

"Feeling pleasure after taking revenge might signal that the original motivation was not to teach the offender a moral lesson, but rather to feel good—a self-oriented and morally questionable motive," comment the scientists.

Intriguingly, there were notable differences between the same scenarios where the survey participants were in the shoes of the avengers and those where they played mere observers. When they imagined they were committing the revenge, the participants perceived themselves as less moral than, say, a colleague of theirs doing the same thing.

Additionally, if it were someone else who took revenge, this person would appear more competent. These results, say the authors, contradict previous scientific evidence that when judging other people, one evaluates their actions from a moral perspective, while self-judgments are typically made with regard to competence.

Among other interesting conclusions made during the series of surveys, the scientists observed that the impression of feeling good (vs. bad) about pursuing revenge did not influence the likelihood of taking revenge.

On average, participants declared they would not have punished their transgressor. Furthermore, it turned out, fear of being condemned themselves had no effect on the likelihood of them retaliating or not.

While reporting quite a few interesting findings, most of which

contrasted previous knowledge and conclusions, the researchers note several limitations of their study that call for further research to confirm their observations.

First, their conclusions might be culturally specific. They remind that, for example, avengers are not judged as harshly in those communities and nations where honor is particularly valued. Second, the surveys used hypothetical situations.

Finally, the authors of the study note, the participants had to merely imagine taking revenge and the resulting good/bad feelings.

More information: Karolina Dyduch-Hazar et al, Feeling bad about feeling good? how avengers and observers evaluate the hedonic pleasure of taking revenge, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2024). [DOI: 10.32872/spb.12477](https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.12477)

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