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Poetic justice or petty jealousy? The aesthetics of revenge

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Abstract

The growing body of research on workplace revenge has focused on *morality-based* principles (e.g., organizational justice) that people use to judge acts of revenge. By contrast, in the present research, we report findings from two studies that focus on *aesthetics-based* principles (e.g., the “beauty” of executing the act of revenge) that people use to judge acts of revenge. In Study 1, a qualitative analysis of revenge incidents, we identify *altruism*, *poetic qualities*, and *symmetry* as aesthetic principles that people use to judge acts of revenge. In Study 2, a quantitative analysis of a policy-capturing experiment, we focused on the symmetry principle. Specifically, we examined the influence of the symmetry of *method* and symmetry of *consequences* in revenge. In that study, we found that workplace revenge is judged less harshly when consequences are symmetric than when they are asymmetric. However, symmetry has the opposite effect on judgments when it comes to symmetry of methods: similar methods were judged more harshly than dissimilar methods. We discuss the influence of aesthetic principles on judgments about revenge, and whether such principles legitimate or delegitimate an act of revenge. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA). All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

There is no denying the aesthetic satisfaction, the sense of poetic justice, that pleases us when evil-doers get the comeuppance they deserve....The satisfaction is heightened when it becomes possible to measure out punishment in exact proportion to the size and shape of the wrong that has been done. – Arthur Lelyveld, *Punishment: For and Against* (1971)

The human tendency to seek revenge against harmdoers has been well documented in the conflict literature (e.g., Pruitt & Rubin, 1986) and the aggression literature (e.g., Berkowitz, 1993). More recently, revenge and retaliation have begun to emerge as an important topics in management research (e.g., Allred, 1999; Bies & Tripp, 1996; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). This scholarly interest is not surprising, for the evidence suggests that revenge is an everyday occurrence in the workplace (Black, 1990; Wall & Callister, 1995).

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While revenge is part of the social fabric of organizational life (Morrill, 1995), the mere mention of the word “revenge” is frightening to most people. For most people, revenge is synonymous with violence, as in angry U.S. postal service employees gunning down their former coworkers (Swisher, 1994). Indeed, revenge is usually viewed as an emotional and irrational act that should not be tolerated in a civilized society (Barreca, 1995; Jacoby, 1983; Solomon, 1990).

This view of revenge, as something ugly, underlies much of the management research on the topic. For example, revenge is conceptualized as a *destructive* and *anti-social* act by researchers, as in the case of research on employee theft (Greenberg, 1990a) and workplace aggression (O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996). Indeed, the prevailing view of revenge is as a form of organizational deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), an aggressive behavior that must be controlled or prevented (Neuman & Baron, 1997).

But revenge has many faces, and not just ugly ones. For the reality is that revenge can also be good—that is, *constructive* and *pro-socially motivated* (Bies & Tripp, 1998). For example, revenge can act as a deterrent against power abuse by organizational authority figures and decision-makers.

Tripp and Bies (1997) studied what features make an act of revenge morally good or bad. In a qualitative study of workers, their data revealed several principles that people use to judge acts of revenge. For example, Tripp and Bies found that avengers judged their acts of revenge as morally bad when the act hurt innocent bystanders or invited counter-retaliation from the “harmdoer” (i.e., the one who is perceived to have provoked the avenger by somehow harming the avenger). Conversely, Tripp and Bies’ avengers judged their acts of revenge as morally good if the act restored the avenger’s status or corrected the harmdoer’s behavior. The identification of morality-based principles is quite consistent with the prevailing view underlying most of the management research on revenge (e.g., Allred, 1999; Bies & Tripp, 1996; McLean-Parks, 1997; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999).

While Tripp and Bies (1997) discuss their findings in terms of morality-based principles only, it occurs to us that some of their findings may be rooted in considerations of aesthetics. For example, they found that proportionate consequences is a feature by which avengers judge their revenge. We observe here that proportionality is not only a central principle of distributive justice theory (e.g., equity theory, Adams, 1965), but is also a central principle of aesthetics theory, where proportionality and symmetry are considered beautiful (Dickie, 1997; Pole, 1983).

The notion that an act of revenge can be beautiful runs contrary to academic discourse on the topic (e.g., O’Leary-Kelly et al., 1996; Robinson & Bennett, 1995), where revenge is labelled as deviant, unjust and tragic. Yet, outside of academic discourse, another view emerges. For example, in her book, *Sweet Revenge: The Wicked Delights of Getting Even*, Barreca (1995) demonstrates that people delight in revenge fantasies, not only privately, but also publicly, particularly in popular fiction, and especially in Hollywood “action” movies that draw in billions of dollars annually in ticket sales and video rentals. This embrace of revenge in literature and in movies led Jacoby (1983) to observe that the “powerful appeal of the revenge theme in mass entertainment is simply one more manifestation of the gap between private feelings about revenge and the public pretense that justice and vengeance have nothing, perish the uncivilized thought, to do with each other” (p. 8).

The truth is this: while few people will admit to approving of revenge, people clearly enjoy hearing revenge stories. But, Barreca also points out that the *way* the revenge is enacted, not only its consequences, is important. For, revenge, when done right, might not only serve the interests of justice, but also, in aesthetic terms, be *poetic* justice. We suspect that popular and classic revenge stories become popular

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