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# Associations between obsessive–compulsive symptoms, revenge, and the perception of interpersonal transgressions

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## ABSTRACT

Anger and aggression have only recently gained center stage in research on obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD). An investigation of obsessive–compulsive (OC) symptoms focusing on the outcome of unresolved anger (i.e., revenge), however, is absent from the literature. The objective of the present research was therefore to provide a first step towards filling this gap and, hence, to systematically examine the associations between OC symptoms and different aspects of revenge (i.e., attitudes, dispositions, motivations). In three independent studies with nonclinical participants ( $N=504$ ), we tested the hypothesis that OC symptoms relate to greater revenge. Individuals high in OC symptoms reported more positive attitudes toward revenge (Study 1), scored higher on a measure of trait revenge (Study 2), and reported increased revenge motivation regarding a real-life transgressor (Study 3). Furthermore, Study 4 ( $N=175$ ) demonstrated that individuals high in OC symptoms perceived interpersonal transgressions more frequently in their daily lives. OC symptoms were positively related to the number of transgressions that respondents disclosed. Our results suggest that revenge and interpersonal hurt play a significant role in OCD.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers have begun to explore how individuals with obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) deal with anger. Whiteside and Abramowitz (2004), for example, demonstrated that nonclinical individuals high in obsessive–compulsive (OC) symptoms experienced more anger, which however was inwardly suppressed (i.e., not openly displayed). Furthermore, relative to individuals low in OC symptoms, difficulties in controlling anger were present. Relatedly, two studies have evidenced that anger experience (but not anger expression) tends to be elevated in OCD (Moscovitch et al., 2008; Radomsky et al., 2007). These results cohere with recent findings that individuals with OCD score higher on measures of latent (covert) aggression (Moritz et al., 2011), as tapped with items such as “When a little misfortune has happened to friends/relatives, I feel a bit pleasure” (Moritz et al., 2009, p. 285).

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Experiences of anger lead to a desire for revenge that does not cease until it is recognized and released (Fitzgibbons, 1986). However, as sketched above, individuals with OCD rarely give vent to their anger, which might perpetuate fantasies of revenge. Indeed, it has been suggested that symptomatic revenge fantasies (e.g., recurrent urges to get back on someone) are similar to intrusive thoughts (obsessions). That is, they are experienced as unwanted, uncontrollable, and anxiogenic (Horowitz, 2007). At present, despite its increasing importance for therapeutic interventions, the concept of “revenge” has been widely neglected in psychiatric research (Gäbler and Maercker, 2011; Horowitz, 2007). Specifically, it is unknown whether individuals high in OC symptoms (1) have more positive attitudes toward revenge, (2) have a more generalized propensity to react to personal offenses with revenge, and (3) experience higher motivations to seek revenge in response to an experienced hurt. The rationale of the present research was therefore to fill these gaps and, hence, to gain insight into the relations between OC symptoms and different aspects of revenge.

### 1.1. Anger, revenge, and negative interpersonal events in OCD

Anger and revenge are said to be related but distinct constructs (Wilkowski et al., 2012). Anger refers to a subjective, negative

emotional experience that varies in intensity, from mild irritation to fury and rage (Spielberger, 1988). Revenge, by contrast, pertains to individuals' beliefs about the morality and desirability of vengeful actions for attaining certain aims (e.g., restoring the moral balance) and their use as interpersonal problem-solving strategy (McCullough et al. 2001, p. 602). Hence, while in anger the focus is on experience, in revenge it is on motivation (Wilkowski et al., 2012). In this line, there is evidence to indicate that revenge is associated with greater motivations to retaliate against and avoid the perceived offender (McCullough et al., 2001). Furthermore, reductions in revenge and avoidance motivation over time are believed to underlie interpersonal forgiving (McCullough et al., 1998).

Might people high in OC symptoms experience higher levels of revenge? To our knowledge, this question has not been empirically examined. However, and consistent with our own clinical experience, some indirect evidence supports this contention. For example, Moritz et al. (2009) demonstrated that individuals with OCD exhibited increased latent aggression (i.e., disguised aggressive obsessions) compared to healthy controls. In line with psychodynamic views (Kempke and Luyten, 2007), latent aggression is concealed by erecting a benevolent façade, which in turn results in ambivalence towards others (Moritz et al., 2009, 2011). This suggestion resonates with survey data showing that interpersonal tensions are frequent in OCD (Hauschildt et al., 2010).

According to Moritz and colleagues, interpersonal conflicts in OCD may result from not obeying to the rules imposed by the individual (Moritz et al., 2012). As most individuals with OCD have high moral attitudes (Moritz et al., 2009), relational situations that compromise the maintenance of a rigid value system may induce anger, further fueling vengeful thoughts, images, and impulses. For example, a family member may not comply with OC-related routines (e.g., "I won't check the door lock for you again!"), treat the individual with OCD unjustly (e.g., "If you don't let me use the car, I'm going to rub my shoes all over your bed!"), or even mock him/her for adhering to idiosyncratic rules (cf. Purdon, 2011). In response to these negative interpersonal events, the angered OCD individual might wish to even the score. This is consistent with Hauschildt et al. (2010) who found that two-thirds of OCD patients fear becoming "mad" and half of them acknowledged behaving aggressively towards their partner.

## 2. Research overview: aims and predictions

Against this background, the aim of the present research was twofold: (a) to examine the relationships between OC symptoms and revenge and (b) to further explore the associations between OC symptoms and the perception of interpersonal transgressions in daily life. To address our first aim, we conducted three online studies, thereby drawing on three representative samples from various cities in Germany. In doing so, we pursued two goals: First, using independent samples from different cities allows for a heterogeneous distribution of participants' OC symptoms and personality. Second, using the internet for recruitment and data collection helps alleviate social desirability biases due to the sensitive nature of the investigated topics (Joinson, 1999; Rhodes et al., 2003). Importantly, we used different self-report measures, each assessing different aspects of revenge, to further increase the generalizability of results across studies. For Studies 1–3, it was hypothesized that OC symptoms would significantly predicts individual differences in revenge. To address the second aim, we designed a fourth study to provide initial empirical evidence that individuals with OCD perceive a greater frequency of negative interpersonal events in their daily social interactions. For Study 4,

it was hypothesized that OC symptoms would significantly predict individuals' perceptions of transgression occurrences.

## 3. Studies 1–3: revenge and OC symptoms

### 3.1. Method

#### 3.1.1. Participants

A total of 504 participants (Study 1:  $n=153$ ,  $M_{\text{age}}=24.38$ ,  $S.D.=5.52$ , age range: 18–47; 72.5% female; Study 2:  $n=178$ ,  $M_{\text{age}}=25.39$ ,  $S.D.=6.48$ , age range: 18–50; 78.1% female; Study 3:  $n=173$ ,  $M_{\text{age}}=26.30$ ,  $S.D.=6.75$ , age range: 19–59; 82% female) voluntarily took part in an online study on "Conflict in everyday life". Participants were invited via mailing lists for psychology experiments hosted at different universities in Germany.

#### 3.1.2. Procedure and measures

Invitation e-mails contained a link to the survey. After consenting to participate, participants provided basic demographic information (age, gender, academic subject) and completed a German version (Gonner et al., 2007) of the Obsessive–Compulsive Inventory–Revised (OCI-R; Foa et al., 2002). The OCI-R is an 18-item self-report scale assessing a wide range of OC symptoms with six subscales: washing, checking, ordering, obsessing, hoarding, and neutralizing. Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale (0 = not at all, 4 = extremely).

Next, participants completed different measures of revenge to allow for generalizability of results. In Study 1, participants completed the 20-item Vengeance Scale (Stuckless and Goranson, 1992; e.g., "It is important for me to get back at people who have hurt me"), which measures individual differences in revenge-seeking attitudes. Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

In Study 2, participants completed the four-item Tendency to Forgive Scale (TTF; Brown, 2003; e.g., "I tend to get over it quickly when someone hurts my feelings") measuring the extent to which individuals generally react to interpersonal offenses with forgiveness (i.e., trait forgiveness). To facilitate the focus on "revenge" in the present research, we reverse-scored two positively worded items so that higher scores indicated greater (trait) revenge. Participants responded to each item on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

In Study 3, participants completed the 12-item Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). The TRIM is a situation-specific (i.e., state) measure of unforgiving motivations toward a real-life transgressor and is divided into two subscales, with five items measuring revenge motivation (e.g., "I'll make him/her pay") and seven items measuring avoidance motivation (e.g., "I am trying to keep as much distance between us as possible"). Participants were instructed to bring to mind a recent situation in which they felt hurt or treated unjustly by someone and to indicate how they felt about that person right now. Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Given that reliving an offense could induce a negative mood in participants (Karremans and Van Lange, 2008), we included a mood rating after the TRIM questionnaire. Participants rated their mood on a 5-point visual analog scale (1 = very sad, 5 = very happy).

### 3.2. Data analytic plan

Preliminary partial correlation analyses with participants' age and gender as potential control variables yielded almost identical results. For reasons of parsimony, these subject variables are not considered for the results reported below. For hypothesis testing, we analyzed bivariate correlations among the OCI-R and personality measures. Additionally, we computed stepwise multiple regression analyses to examine which subscale of the OCI-R uniquely predicts revenge (the entry and removal criteria were  $P < 0.05$  and  $P > 0.10$ , respectively). All statistical tests adopted a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$  (two-tailed).

## 4. Results and discussion

Table 1 details descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations by study. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were satisfactory, except for the neutralizing subscale of the OCI-R ( $\alpha$ 's ranging from 0.41 to 0.57; see Table 1). This pattern is congruent with the low reliability of this subscale reported in previous research (Foa et al., 2002).

Our main hypothesis was that OC symptoms would be associated with greater revenge. In Study 1, the total OCI-R score and obsessing were significantly and positively related to revenge-seeking attitudes. When the OCI-R subscales were entered stepwise as predictors of revenge-seeking attitudes in a multiple regression analysis, obsessing was the sole significant predictor

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