



## Displaced revenge: Can revenge taste “sweet” if it aims at a different target?



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Displaced revenge is targeted at a different person than the original transgressor.
- We examine conditions under which displaced revenge can be satisfying.
- Displaced revenge is satisfying when the transgressor group is highly entitative.
- Interconnectedness and similarity between transgressor and target are both important.
- Displaced revenge is goal-directed and can achieve a sense of justice.

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates whether acts of displaced revenge, that is, revenge targeted at a different person than the original transgressor, can be satisfying for the avenger. We assume that displaced revenge can lead to justice-related satisfaction when the group to which the original transgressor and the displaced target belong is highly entitative. Two experimental online studies show that displaced revenge leads to less regret (Study 1;  $N = 169$ ) or more satisfaction (Study 2;  $N = 89$ ) when the transgressor and the displaced target belong to a group that is perceived as highly entitative. Study 3 ( $N = 72$ ) shows that avengers experience more satisfaction when members of the transgressor group were manipulated to be both strongly interconnected and similar in their appearance. Results of an internal meta-analysis furthermore corroborate the notion that displaced revenge leads to more satisfaction when the transgressor group is highly entitative. Taken together, our findings suggest that even displaced revenge can achieve a sense of justice in the eyes of avengers.

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### Introduction

On the afternoon of May 23, 2013, the 25-year old British soldier Lee Rigby was attacked and brutally killed by two Islamic extremists in Woolwich, southeast London. Soon after the killing, a video appeared on the Internet in which one of the murderers proclaimed that “The only reason we have killed this man today is because Muslims are dying daily by British soldiers [...] And this British soldier is one. It is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Rayner & Swinford, 2013). Lee Rigby was obviously murdered to avenge the killing of Muslims by the British military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. This brutal act exemplifies that violence can spread beyond the initial agents of a conflict and that even innocent people are suddenly deemed as appropriate targets for retaliation. This phenomenon appears in many guises—terrorism, war, or gang fights. What all of these instances have in common is

that they are acts of revenge, and that these vengeful reactions are targeted against people who were entirely uninvolved in the act that sparked these vengeful desires. In that sense, the murder of Lee Rigby was *displaced* because he was not a perpetrator himself, but merely a member of the perpetrator group.

Interestingly, these acts of *displaced revenge* or *vicarious retribution*<sup>1</sup> (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006) have not received abundant attention in the social–psychological literature so far. Previous research (Stenstrom, Lickel, Denson, & Miller, 2008) investigated which factors promote acts of displaced revenge, but has not yet considered whether displaced revenge can actually be satisfying (“sweet”) for victims. However, the question whether revenge targeted at a different person than the original provocateur can be satisfying is not only an interesting question in and of itself, but it may also be useful in elucidating under which circumstances such acts can possibly be successful in a sense that they fulfill a need or reach a goal. The present research is the first to

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<sup>1</sup> The terms retribution, vengeance, revenge, punishment, and retaliation will be used interchangeably in this article.

address this question in a context in which participants were personally victimized and took revenge against another person who was uninvolved in the initial harm-doing. Identifying the conditions under which even displaced revenge can be satisfying is supposed to contribute to a deeper and more refined understanding of vengeful desires, their motivational forces, and their emotional consequences.

### *The sweetness of revenge*

Displaced revenge can be defined as retributive reactions toward a prior transgression that are not directed against the original transgressor(s), but rather against uninvolved targets. Thus, displaced revenge represents one facet of “group-based retribution,” which refers to repeated cycles of vengeful acts committed by members of two (or more) opposing groups (cf. Lickel, 2012). These cycles are often a core element of intractable conflicts between groups; they are highly emotional, often violent, and particularly difficult to stop.

So far, the social psychological literature has focused on the contextual conditions that make displaced revenge likely to occur. One of these conditions is the extent to which the perpetrator group is perceived as “entitative,” that is, as a coherent and unified entity (Lickel et al., 2006). The more members of the victimized group perceive the perpetrator group as entitative, the more likely displaced revenge occurs, that is, the more likely will retaliatory acts be directed against the entire target group, no matter whether other members were involved in the original victimization (Stenstrom et al., 2008). Notably, this research illuminates under which circumstances acts of displaced revenge are more likely to occur, but it does not provide an answer to the question of whether acts of displaced revenge are actually *satisfying* for victims and lead to a sense of re-established justice. However, this question is of considerable importance for understanding the psychological dynamics underlying acts of displaced revenge, and especially for the question whether displaced revenge can be conceptualized as a goal-directed behavior. If revenge is indeed goal-directed, feelings of satisfaction, a sense re-established justice, and a state of psychological closure should indicate that the goal – whatever it is – has been achieved. For instance, research on revenge in dyadic interactions (Gollwitzer, Meder, & Schmitt, 2011) has shown that revenge does not feel good unless the target of one’s vengeful reactions understands why revenge has been taken against him or her. More recent research shows that revenge leads to the experience of justice-related satisfaction when it affects a change in the offender’s attitudes (Funk, McGeer, & Gollwitzer, 2014). These findings were also replicated with a more unobtrusive measure of goal-attainment (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009): participants who successfully took revenge showed higher levels of implicit goal fulfillment (i.e., a reduced accessibility of aggression-related words). Taken together, this research suggests that revenge is indeed goal-directed: it aims at delivering a message to the offender (“don’t mess with me”). Thus, in intergroup conflicts, it would be plausible to assume that group-based revenge aims at delivering a message to the perpetrator group (“don’t mess with us;” see Gollwitzer et al., 2014).

The present research aims at elucidating whether even displaced revenge can be satisfying and lead to perceptions of justice achieved. This is by no means a trivial issue: some studies suggest that acts of revenge may lead to feelings of regret, guilt, and shame (Boon, Alibhai, & Deveau, 2011; Crombag, Rassin, & Horselenberg, 2003; Tripp & Bies, 1997), and that avengers tend to overestimate the extent to which revenge feels sweet (Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008). So what about displaced revenge? It is quite likely to assume that revenge does not lead to feelings of satisfaction and justice achieved if the target of one’s vengeful reaction is not identical with the original perpetrator. After all, taking revenge against a target that was not involved in the initial transgression obviously violates the principles of justice (Barton, 1999) and may be judged as morally wrong or unethical (e.g., Rupp & Bell, 2010; Uniacke, 2000). However, we will argue that even displaced revenge can sometimes taste sweet under certain

conditions. The condition we focus on in the present research is the extent to which the target of one’s vengeful act and the original perpetrator belong to a highly entitative group (see Gollwitzer & Sjöström, *in press*). The theoretical rationale underlying this hypothesis will be developed in the following sections.

### *Displaced revenge and group entitativity*

The term “entitativity” describes the extent to which an aggregate of individuals is perceived as a unified and coherent entity (Campbell, 1958). Consider a group of people waiting at a bus stop: These people do form a group, but members are heterogeneous in appearance and only loosely connected to each other. The group is arbitrary in its composition and easily dissolvable; in other words, it is prototypical for a low-entitativity group. Now consider two sports teams playing against each other. Group members within each team are homogeneous in appearance (they all wear the same jerseys) and strongly dependent on each other in order to achieve a common goal. Such a group can be considered high in entitativity.

Entitativity has been investigated in the context of group perceptions (e.g., McConnell, Sherman, & Hamilton, 1997) and intergroup conflicts. For instance, perceptions of entitativity are associated with intergroup threat (i.e., high-entitativity groups are perceived as more threatening than low-entitativity groups; Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998), attributions of collective blame to a group for an individual group member’s actions (Denson, Lickel, Curtis, Stenstrom, & Ames, 2006), and the likelihood of group-directed aggression (Gaertner & Iuzzini, 2005). For example, people behaved more aggressively toward an out-group when they felt rejected (Gaertner, Iuzzini, & O’Mara, 2008) and supported more severe punishments for transgressor groups (Newheiser, Sawaoka, & Dovidio, 2012) if these groups were perceived as highly (vs. low) entitative. In this sense, entitativity may function as a targeting system indicating who is a suitable substitute for the original transgressor.

While, at first glance, it seems irrational and morally questionable to take revenge against an individual who was not personally involved in the initial transgression, things might be different if both the transgressor and the target belong to a highly entitative group. For example, empirical evidence suggests that in highly entitative groups the responsibility of a single transgressor dilutes, whereas responsibility of the entire group increases (Sherman & Percy, 2010; Waytz & Young, 2012). More precisely, people believe that members of such highly entitative groups could *and* should have prevented the transgressor’s action, or even actively promoted the initial transgression (Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003; see also Lickel, 2012). In addition, such responsibility judgments may be influenced by beliefs that the target and the initial transgressor share the same blameworthy characteristics that make her/him an appropriate target for retaliation (e.g., Lickel et al., 2006). Thus, revenge against any member of a highly entitative group can be perceived as legitimate from the victims’ perspective and therefore leads to feelings of satisfaction.

### *Interconnectedness and similarity: two facets of entitativity*

In the literature on group perception, two different ways of construing entitativity are distinguished: (1) group membership can be defined by sharing commonalities and similarities in appearances (i.e., superficial similarities), or (2) group membership can be defined by mutual interaction, interdependence and interconnectedness between group members (Rutchick, Hamilton, & Sack, 2008; Wilder & Simon, 1998; see also Brewer, Hong, & Li, 2004). Adding to a long line of theorizing on this distinction, recent research shows that perceptions of entitativity can arise from both superficial similarities and interconnectedness (Ip, Chiu, & Wan, 2006).

First, entitativity based on superficial similarities (e.g., similar appearance) evokes inferences about psychological homogeneity (Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). In this

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