

The Cultural Psychology of Revenge and Forgiveness

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Overview of Issue

Revenge behavior, or acts intended to directly or indirectly harm a party blamed for some prior wrongdoing, are ubiquitous. Even a casual observer of the geo-political scene is likely to acknowledge that the desire 'to get even' underlies much of human conflict. Psychology and legal scholars have developed models of revenge, noting that the revenge process is characterized by three distinct, yet connected stages, beginning with the victim's perception of a harmful act, followed by the victim's assignment of blame for that harmful act to another party, and resulting in the victim's retaliatory aggression aimed at the blamed party.^{1,2} Yet despite the fact that revenge is a global phenomenon, there has been a dearth of attention to the role of culture in the revenge process. Indeed, ample research that has illustrated that culture affects a wide range of social and organizational phenomenon,^{3,4,5} and revenge should be no exception.

Culture theory and research offers some insights into the cognitive and emotional pathways to revenge across cultures. For example, cultural differences in individualism and collectivism^{6,7} is relevant to understanding the psychology of revenge, including a) the types of violations that trigger perceptions of harm, b) the cognitions and emotions that motivate thoughts of revenge, and c) the behavioral tactics used to get even. Research in our laboratory has shown, for example, that identical conflicts are perceived quite differently across cultures. Violations of face and honor are more salient and perceived to be much more harmful among collectivistic samples, whereas violations of rights are much more salient and harmful among individualistic samples.^{8,9} Shame appears to be a powerful motivator of revenge thoughts among collectivists whereas anger is a powerful motivator among individualists. As well, injustices to group members are more "contagious" among collectivists, who experience vicarious shame when group members have been humiliated, leading to the impulse to seek revenge on others' behalf. Collectivism may also be implicated in beliefs the importance of group longevity over and above personal longevity, leading to greater self-sacrifice for the benefit of the group.

In addition to understanding the cognitive and emotional pathways to revenge across cultures, it is equally important to examine how culture affects the willingness to forgive and restore trust. For example, how should President Bush explain the Abu Gharib situations to Iraqi citizens, and do such explanations affect the likelihood of conflict escalation and/or forgiveness? Do certain situations that demand apologies in the United States call for the same or dramatically different explanations in other countries? Is there cultural variation in the expected timing and form of apologies? Western research tends to focus on "rational/legal" models of forgiveness, wherein priority is given to who is to blame and identifying a fair and just compensation. Apologies that are given promptly are often seen as insincere¹⁰. Yet it unclear whether Western models of apology apply across cultures, where assigning blame and intentionality is less important than quickly restoring a sense of honor.

Relevance to homeland security and recommendations:

The lack of theory and empirical data focusing on cultural influences on revenge and forgiveness is a significant omission considering the practical relevance of the subject. Knowledge of cross-cultural differences in the revenge process is critical to bolster our ability to intervene in this cyclical and often destructive practice. Indeed, as the U.S. seeks to respond to and prevent global terrorism, it must understand the cultural factors that influence such acts. Social and organizational psychologists are well-posed to examine the cultural psychology of revenge and forgiveness using laboratory, field, and archival methodologies. Cultivating and funding a multinational research team involving scholars from the U.S, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and Latin America who work collaboratively on these issues would be highly beneficial.

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