

# COMMENTARY: REFLECTIONS ON THE DESIRE FOR REVENGE

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*Systems of justice... for example, can be regarded as the successful transformation of a deep-seated urge for revenge – euphemized as retribution – which keeps the urge within acceptable boundaries*

Frans De Waal,  
*Good Natured*, p. 194

## INTRODUCTION

It's so simple really, the problem of violence: Hurt people hurt people. The motivation is revenge, not because human beings are fundamentally evil, but because vengeance is part of the innate survival mechanics of a complex social species. The desire for vengeance is as old – or older – than humankind and to understand this complex and ancient response, we need to push aside our socially developed notions of revenge and look for its roots. Reciprocity, or “tit-for-tat” is the basis of social relationships, manifesting even among our primate ancestors. Behavior that sabotages cooperation, so necessary for survival, will be punished. Chimpanzees experience retaliatory outrage for cheating behavior among their peers and will exact punishment. A similar retaliatory outrage can be traced throughout human history, but we call

it a “thirst for vengeance.” The desire for revenge is an evolved outgrowth of our human sense of unsatisfied reciprocity, what today we consider a desire for justice. But notions of justice can be twisted and tortured to fit the needs of the moment and the demands of the social system. So too, can justice be twisted to address the internal economy of the individual.

If we hope to understand why people act out violently towards themselves and others, we need to examine the roots of violence in childhood. In the course of normal development, children learn how to modulate and manage the desire to “get even” for hurts to their bodies, their sense of identity, and their cherished beliefs. Psychobiologic inhibitory responses to anger develop in the context of an empathic relationship with caretakers. In interaction with family members and peers, children learn the rules of fair play, the role of apology, and how to cooperate with others.

Even so, studies of normal populations tell us the urge to retaliate for wrongs lingers through adulthood. Not only physical or sexual assault, but also emotional abuse provokes retaliatory behavior unless a sufficient number of mitigating factors impact on the desire and action of seeking revenge. Whether in interpersonal relationships or the workplace, human beings retaliate for perceived injustice if they continue to be treated poorly, if there is no apology for misconduct, and if they feel morally justified in their outrage.

It is not difficult then to understand how things could go very wrong, how people who are very badly treated by others, especially when that bad treatment originates in childhood, could become excessively violent. The brain is a delicate organ, and any damage to the brain can also damage the development of normal inhibitory pathways in caretaker relationships. If children’s attachment relationships are disrupted, as is the case with exposure to trauma, abuse and neglect, they will fail to develop normal biological and psychological mechanisms that inhibit retaliatory behavior. If they come from violent and abusive homes, children learn to be violent, learn that violence is a viable and effective means of solving problems. Because abusive adults were often exposed to abuse and/or neglect as children, an important way of viewing the intergenerational cycle of abuse is through the lens of displaced revenge.

In clinical populations and in literature we can see many examples of the deep connection between shame, grief, and the desire for vengeance. People prone to experience overwhelming shame in response to disrespect are most likely to become angry, violent and retaliatory when shamed and may direct their anger at the person who has hurt them, at innocent others, or at themselves. Under the guise of a quest for justice, an ongoing desire for revenge may also serve as a defense against completing the tasks of mourning and thus impede therapeutic progress and improvement in life adjustment.

However complex the mechanism, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that many abused children will grow up to wreck vengeance on themselves and those around them. Failures in healthy development may also lead to failure in the ability to successfully evolve a personal system of justice that is fair, meaningful and satisfying. Developmental arrests in the process of developing healthy notions of reciprocal behavior can lead to psychopathological behavior and relationships. Criminals are trying to exact revenge for past injuries and injustices that have not been rectified. Bullying in a child or an adult is abusive behavior that the bully experiences as justified and right. Corporal punishment, the deliberate infliction of pain as retaliation for perceived wrongdoing, puts children at risk for engaging in many forms of displaced retaliatory behaviors. Studies of delinquent and prison populations demonstrate the high correlation between criminal behavior and a previous history of childhood abusive behavior.

Revenge can be defined as *“the infliction of harm in righteous response to perceived harm or injustice”* (Stuckless and Goranson, 1994, p. 803) or as *“the attempt, at some cost or risk to oneself, to impose suffering upon those who have made one suffer, because they have made one suffer”* (Elster, 1990, p. 862). Revenge can be differentiated from normal defensive aggression in two ways: it occurs after the damage has been done, and hence is not a defense against threat, is of much greater intensity, and is often cruel, lustful and insatiable (Fromm, 1973). The quest for revenge can be seen as: 1) a motivation for aggression; 2) as a source of psychological distress; 3) as a key factor in the philosophical discussion of punishment and justice (Stuckless and Goranson, 1994). The search for vengeance poses enormous problems for humanity. An injured individual is rarely in the position of applying a balanced solution to a wrong that has been perpetrated against him or her. The problem

of vengeance is a social problem that must be resolved in the complex interaction between the victim, the perpetrator and the social group. Acts of “wild vengeance,” therefore, can be seen not only as the failure of the violent individual, but also the failure of the social group. Revenge is justice gone awry and takes over when society’s institutions fail. If, as a society, we are to eliminate violent perpetration, then we must socially evolve systems of justice that effectively contain and manage the human desire for revenge.

## REVENGE AND JUSTICE AMONG PRIMATES

Chimpanzees, our closest genetic cousins, are a highly sociable species with a well-developed system of reciprocity. Reciprocal relations probably developed out of the need for food sharing in a species dependent upon food exchange, especially in support of pregnant and nursing females and young offspring. Retaliation for breaches in reciprocity became an integral part of the chimpanzee social system and out of this grew a “system of revenge” according to the noted primatologist, Frans de Waal (1996). Reciprocal altruism is an idea first developed by Robert Trivers in the early 1970’s. It is a complex mechanism based on the remembrance of favors given and received, allowing the development of cooperative networks that expand beyond kinship ties. As de Waal points out, *“the Golden Rule was made by creatures who began following the reciprocity rule, ‘do as the other did, and expect the other to do as you did’”* (p. 136). The first hints of moral obligation and indebtedness are already recognizable among primates. But Trivers also recognized that a reciprocal relationship would only last as long as there was no cheating. Cheating – taking more than one gives – undermines the system of cooperation and can threaten everyone in a complex, interactive social system. The only way to protect against this is to make cheating costly, an outcome leading to the evolution of punishment.

Cheating, or dealing unfairly with someone who has dealt fairly with you, arouses indignation, moral outrage, and the perception of injustice. De Waal has observed what appears to be retaliatory “outrage” and punishment among chimpanzees. Chimpanzees keep negative acts directed at them by others in their minds for extended periods of time until they find an opportunity to retaliate and then they do so. So

convinced has De Waal become that he has commented, *“It is safe to assume that the actions of our ancestors were guided by gratitude, obligation, retribution, and indignation long before they developed enough language capacity for moral discourse”* (De Waal, 1996, p. 161). If this is so, then there must be a biopsychosocial substrate for vengeful acts, so much a part of our evolutionary makeup.

## A QUICK SURVEY OF REVENGE THROUGHOUT WESTERN HISTORY

### TIT-FOR-TAT

Robert Axelrod (1984) has explored the psychosocial basis of the evolution of cooperation. In opposition to earlier philosophers like Thomas Hobbes who argued that cooperation could only develop as a result of central authority and strong government, Axelrod developed a model demonstrating that cooperation can, in fact, evolve from small clusters of individuals who base their cooperation on reciprocal relationships and interact with each other without any central authority. In 1979, he sent a number of professional game theorists invitations to a computer tournament. He challenged them to demonstrate the best, most winning strategy in the game of Prisoner’s Dilemma, a lifelike paradox discovered in 1950 by Melvin Dresher and Merrill Flood of the RAND Corporation (Hofstadter, 1985). The bottom line lesson of Prisoner’s Dilemma is that although in the short run, you may make out better if you betray the trust of another person – if you cheat and are quite selfish –both parties do better if they cooperate and are honest with each other, at least if they are going to have more than one interaction. But that finding only emerges over the long haul, after many interactions. In shorter amounts of interactional time, different people will try many different strategies to reach their own maximum benefit, and some of those strategies will involve cheating the other person. Axelrod wanted to find out what strategy or strategies would be most victorious for the otherwise selfish individual over a long series of interactions with the other.

The one program that won the most points in the thousands of games that were played was submitted by Anatol Rappaport and was the shortest of all submitted programs - “Tit for Tat.” The game uses a very

simple strategy: Cooperate on the first move and, thereafter, do whatever the other player did the previous move. Tit-for-tat has four “personality traits:” *niceness* - it never betrays the other’s trust first; *provocability* – betrayal of trust on the part of the other provokes immediate retaliation in kind; *forgiveness* – it never holds a grudge once the other renegotiates trust, *clarity* - straightforward consistency in revealing this sequence of steps.

The provocability aspect of this game of cooperation is essential for discussing the notion of revenge. It implies that retaliation may be a necessary, though not sufficient strategy in interpersonal relationships. But it also implies that there are severe constraints to that retaliation. The injury and the response must be balanced. An over-retaliatory response provokes escalation while an under-retaliatory response provokes exploitation. It may not be that revenge as retaliation is so bad for people, but that we have no ongoing methodology for the establishment of balanced and fair retaliation.

## REVENGE AS OUR HERITAGE

Revenge is a legacy of our animal-fighting, prehistoric past (Ehrenreich, 1997). In its simplest form, revenge does what it does in the chimpanzee world – it warns the boundary violator to stay away and not cross over that boundary again or risk escalating and negative consequences. It also tells the other about one’s power and place. The creature that does not fight back, in fact, may be marked as prey. To avoid this outcome, it makes sense to retaliate rapidly, efficiently, and definitively to any encroachment on one’s territory. Human beings evolved in a hostile evolutionary context, one in which we were a relatively powerless and defenseless animal surrounded by predatory beasts. In the face of this reality, acts of revenge became a source of power and mastery for a species conditioned through millions of years of experience to being the helpless prey of other, larger and hungry beasts.

For many early tribal cultures, vengeance was a family matter. Murder was a stain upon the land, a pollution of an entire people. If one member of the family was injured or killed, it was the absolute obligation of the other family members to exact revenge. If revenge could not be adequately exacted in this generation, then it was obligatorily passed on to the next and all subsequent generations. As a

result, human history reflects a long period of tribal vendetta and blood revenge vividly described in this passage, *“A single deed of blood provokes an endless series of retaliations: a hideous orgy of revenge . . . an orgy from which no one may escape; for old men and women and children perish, whether one by one, or in a general massacre”* (Jacoby (1983) quoting Treston, p.67).

In the course of Western civilization, what followed was a long retreat from this type of uncontrolled vengeful violence. For the Greeks, revenge was a constant in the moral universe, but there were powerful social controls placed upon the exaction of revenge. Human beings were relatively helpless in relationship to the forces of the gods and nature. Blood cried out for blood and the gods were vengeful gods. Revenge was justice, but revenge had to honor certain social principles of constraint. In *“The Choepori”*, for example, Aeschylus writes, *“The dart that flies in darkness, sped from hell by spirits of the murdered dead who call unto their kin for vengeance.”*

As we have recently seen in Bosnia/Herzegovina and Rwanda, a society pays a high price for the relentless pursuit of blood revenge. Systems of law were designed to take revenge out of the hands of families and put the right of retaliation into the hands of authorities. The three functions of law are to punish the guilty, exonerate the innocent, and deter those who might, in the absence of sufficiently reliable and unpleasant penalties, sustain themselves by preying upon others. It was through the law that private revenge was separated from public revenge. *“The conceptual shift upon which all legal restraint of revenge is based is the movement from diffuse to specific responsibility, from hereditary guilt and punishment to individual accountability”* (Jacoby, 1983, p. 120). Laws did away with the ancient custom of private settlement under which a murderer could compensate the victim’s family for his crime, although private settlement continues to haunt us today in our reluctance to apply the same criminal penalties to family crimes as we do to other crimes.

Over time, the relationships between crime and the proportionality of punishment changed, dependent on social conditions. Much is made of the Biblical references to revenge as a justification for capital punishment but the *lex talionis*, “eye for an eye” passage, actually appears to reflect a long Jewish tradition of limiting personal vengeance

not encouraging it. Instead of punishing an entire family for the death of a child, a husband, or a leader, Jews were being instructed to limit their vengeance-seeking to “an eye for an eye.” Reflecting this historical movement from private to public revenge, there are many admonitions in the Bible against unlimited, personal revenge. Cities of refuge were created to provide a place for the innocent to flee in order to protect them from blood revenge (Jacoby, 1983). The Biblical Jesus preached much more about positive charity than he did about retribution.

Contrary to the teachings of Jesus, and as Christianity evolved, Christian authorities freely used cruel punishment as a means of avenging the wrongs they felt their victims had committed as well as a way of acquiring and maintaining power. Here is an example of the dangers that adhere to fusing a lust for power and control, and the means of achieving both, with the basic desire for revenge:

*The history of vengeance committed in the name of God is not a function of any one religion but of the union of religious and political power. It is one of the great paradoxes of religious history that sacred injunctions designed to contain the worst impulses of men and women have, when wedded to secular power, so often been vehicles to express those very passions . . . The Christianity preached by Jesus makes abandonment of vengeance a condition of personal salvation; the Christianity expounded by ecclesiastical authority has, at many points in history, made vindictiveness a condition of institutional survival. (Jacoby, 1983, p. 99).*

This vengeance was particularly virulent when directed against Jews and was justified by religious and secular authorities because the Jews were considered responsible for the death of Christ. This led to a backsliding into an example of one-sided hereditary vengeance not apparent since earlier eras in which each successive generation became responsible for the deeds of the previous generations, providing a basis for several millennia of virulent anti-Semitism.

By the Elizabethan era, private revenge was publicly condemned because in taking revenge, man was usurping the role and prerogative of God. The monarch, and by extension the state, could, however, exact revenge because they did so in the name of God as God’s authorized agents. Many of Shakespeare’s greatest plays speak to the issue of vengeance, particularly *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus* and revenge tragedies were a particular Elizabethan genre of plays favored by

audiences. Throughout this period, however, personal vengeance still could be sought through dueling, a practice which was overtly outlawed but remained a matter of honor, particularly among the upper class.

For the most part thinkers of the Enlightenment were born into a world in which revenge had been tamed and legalized through the justice system. Vengeance and punishment were now in the hands of the increasingly powerful State, and revenge combined with power produced draconian punishments far in excess of the crimes. The Enlightenment marked what has been called a *'critical stage in the domestication of revenge'* (Jacoby, 1983, p. 139). Enlightenment theorists recognized that it was not enough to control private revenge if public revenge sanctioned almost any unjust punishment and a reflection of this position could be seen in the banning of "cruel and unusual punishment" that is a part of the U.S. Constitution.

In the twentieth century, views of revenge have been influenced by a number of social factors – a diminution in the kind of religious faith that sees God as the ultimate judge who will exact punishment from evildoers, the rise of the psychological understanding of human nature and fallibility, and the enormity of the Holocaust for which no adequate revenge is conceivable. Still, lying behind our system of justice, and even more thinly veiled in the past two decades than in the ones just before, the desire for vengeance can be seen to derail common sense. In just the last twenty years we have witnessed a dramatic swing from viewing imprisonment as an opportunity for rehabilitation to a vocal and insistent demand that prisons be as punitive as the law allows and the United States now has proportionately more citizens in prison than any other Western nation. Children who commit murderous acts, some not even adolescents, are now being tried and punished as adults. Relatively little attention is paid to the fact that with this increasingly punitive response, we are failing to address the underlying problems of what is motivating so much antisocial behavior and that the response itself may be making the problem worse by escalating, not diminishing, the cycle of revenge.

Understanding the underlying dynamics of the intergenerational cycle of abuse and retaliation requires a deeper understanding of the history of childhood. The treatment of children has roughly paralleled the social evolution of institutionalized revenge. In our early history, violence

towards children was unregulated and purely at the discretion of parents or authority figures. At least in Western society, children have ~~always~~ recurrently been used as scapegoats for the aggressive impulses of adults (DeMause, 1990; 1991). Gradually, however, the safety and well-being of children has begun to achieve some protection, at least in the industrialized West. However, the inherent power imbalance between adults and children lends itself to abusive power. Retaliation on the part of the adult for what is perceived as a child's offensive behavior or betrayal of trust, is frequently an over-retaliation that the child cannot reciprocate without risking further over-retaliation on the part of the adult. The child, treated unfairly, can only bide its time, accumulating a store of vengeful fantasies and desires for retribution and justice. Abusive behavior on the part of parents, including emotional abuse, may be viewed as retaliatory behavior resulting from defense mechanisms like displacement, when revenge for the emotional, physical or sexual abuse suffered at the hands of one generation is taken out upon the subsequent generation.

It is clear that the need for revenge is deeply rooted in our individual development into a social being and when transmuted into a system of justice, becomes one of the building blocks for a civilized society. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of revenge, it is useful to explore further this notion of reciprocity and how reciprocal relationships develop.

## A DEVELOPMENTAL LOOK AT REVENGE

### NORMAL DEVELOPMENT

Anyone who has been around young children knows that around the age of 13 months, infants often become dominated by anger, propelling them into states of arousal too intense for them to manage. As the child matures, rages and tantrums give way to socioemotional maturation as the child becomes better at modulating affect (Schore, 1994). The role of shame is to diminish extremes of other affect states and it may be shame that serves to inhibit the hyperaroused rage state provoked by the developing but still immature limbic system. In the interaction between mother and child, the disgusted face of the mother triggers a rapid brake on arousal as shame is triggered in the child, thus fulfilling

the unique role of shame in emotional expression regulation (Nathanson, 1992).

An infant raised in an environment optimal for the healthy development of his or her affect system is never exposed to extended periods of parental shaming behavior or dyscontrol. Instead she has parents who are able to empathetically respond to their child's need for emotional regulation. Throughout development, parents must be able to tolerate strong negative emotion in the child and be able to exert self-control over their own negative affect and impulses. As parents set consistent and clear limits on the child, while empathizing with the range of the child's emotions, the child's brain develops the necessary inhibitory mechanisms for self-regulation of aggressive and impulsive behavior. Researchers believe that this inhibition is a result of the structural transformation or "rewiring" of the orbitofrontal cortex, expressed in the braking mechanism of healthy shame affect that leads to inhibition and distress (Schoore, 1994).

Empathy is an essential prerequisite for social and moral development and empathy develops in the context of a responsive dyadic relationship between the child and his or her caretakers. Children learn about empathy for others through the empathic responses they receive from others. At first, mother comforts the distressed child, and then later, as the inhibitory system continues to develop, the child develops the capacity to remember the parental comforting and, at about eighteen months, becomes able to evoke an internal picture of this comforting presence. This allows the child to begin the long process of developing symbolic ways of self-soothing when distressed. As the child's normal retaliatory responses come into play in early social interactions, the empathic parent gradually shapes those responses into socially acceptable forms, slowly and interactively teaching empathy for others, the channeling of responses into more socially responsible pathways, as well as the nature of apology, forgiveness, and remorse.

At about eighteen months of age, the child first exhibits prosocial altruistic behavior. During the second or third year of life, children become very concerned about issues of fairness, although their initial concern is with being treated fairly. Children begin to protest against unfair treatment as early as one year of age. Around age four, they become capable of learning how to treat others fairly (Schulman and

Mekler, 1994). Studies have also looked at how children make decisions about retaliation after an intentional or accidental injury to their property. The average age of the children was almost nine years for boys, and a little over nine years for girls. Even at that age, children were capable of making very subtle discriminations between intentional acts and accidental acts that shaped their responses to a perpetrator's actions. They also made subtle discriminations between types of retaliation, the age of the perpetrator, and the relationship of the victim to the perpetrator (Herzberger and Hall, 1993). In this way, gradually and in interaction with significant others in their social environment, normal children learn how to modulate and manage their normal desires for retaliatory vengeance and channel these desires into socially acceptable behavior. Children certainly compete with each other, but they also learn how to cooperate with each other as a fundamental social strategy, even when adults aren't around to tell them what to do.

### A FEW NORMAL POPULATION STUDIES

In the 1960's, Bert Brown (1968) decided to investigate the conditions under which people will act in a vengeful manner, even at substantial cost to themselves. He studied sixty teenage males drawn from New York City public high schools. The conclusion he drew from his findings supports a relationship between shame and revenge. When these boys believed that they looked foolish, they were more likely to retaliate, even at substantial cost to themselves in terms of monetary compensation. This study demonstrates that actual physical or sexual assaults are not necessary to provoke vengeful feelings and behavior – emotional abuse that evokes shame will also evoke retaliatory revenge.

More recently researchers decided to examine the varieties and predictors of revenge-related behavior within organizations by studying ninety MBA students. When an apology was given, or an explanation for the perpetrator's behavior was offered, weakened revenge motives were the result, whereas the absence of an apology or explanation strengthened revenge motives. When the offense was believed to be due to the selfishness or malevolence of the perpetrator, revenge motivation was higher. A period of strong emotional arousal by anger, bitterness and sometimes disorientation was often followed by a stage of rumination that included both individual rumination and gossip and set the stage for the continued growth of revenge motives. People seem

to feel that revenge is morally justified if they believe the perpetrator has willfully harmed them. This sense of harm extends far beyond actual physical harm and includes harm to one's self-esteem, value system, sense of respect, and to one's feelings being misunderstood or maligned (Bies and Tripp, 1996).

Several studies demonstrate the powerful effect of emotional interactions to arouse the desire for revenge without the presence of actual physical harm and how emotionally mitigating factors can impact the desire for and action directed towards seeking revenge. One study looked at how mitigating information may affect the inclination of a male victim to retaliate against an aggressor – in this case a rude person – in an experimental situation. They found that the earlier the victim heard the mitigating information that helped to explain the behavior of the aggressor, the less likely the retaliation. Those who heard the mitigating information after a lapse of time, or those who met with additional provocation, retaliated at the same rate as those who did not receive any mitigating information. This study demonstrated that strong norms of politeness govern our role-based interactions and that when these norms are broken, retaliation often does occur (Kremer & Stephens, 1983).

Explaining the mitigating factors early helped lessen retaliation, but there are limits to this curbing tendency, especially if there is another provocation or if the victim is already upset when they hear the mitigating information. In a related study, mitigating information lost its ability to reduce hostility and retaliation when the victim was already in a state of high physiological excitation. The authors hypothesized that the arousal increased the cognitive load on the victim to such an extent that their ability to do any cognitive work, i.e., the work of forgiveness, was compromised (Zillman et al., 1975). Mitigating information reduces physiological hyperarousal regardless of the timing, but mitigating information received after provocation is much less a deterrent to hostility and retaliation than mitigating information provided before the arousing event (Zillman & Cantor, 1976).

In a study looking at infidelity and revenge motives, research demonstrated that people feel less guilty about intentionally hurting others through actions motivated by what they consider to be justified revenge, than they feel when they hurt others unintentionally. When

people become convinced that they have a right to seek revenge, the normal prosocial effects of guilt cease to operate, making it less likely that they will seek forgiveness, grant forgiveness, or reconcile. Additionally, people who have acted out of revenge appear to offer accounts for their behavior that makes reconciliation more difficult following interpersonal transgressions (Morgeau et al.,1994).

There is also a relationship between conflict escalation, retaliatory behavior, and a desire to restore one's own sense of lost personal power. If people are provoked and their personal power is restored, they are less likely to retaliate. The restoration of victims' perceived power through elevating their status relative to their perpetrator's status appeared to attenuate the tendency to retaliate, while the lack of such elevations in power relative to the perpetrator made retaliation more likely (Fagenson & Cooper, 1987).

The relationship between apology and subsequent retaliatory aggression on the part of the victim has also been investigated. Apologies are helpful in reducing the negative impressions of a perpetrator held by the victim, reducing the negative affect of the victim, and reducing the victim's aggression against the perpetrator. However, this finding may only hold under conditions of mild rather than severe harm (Ohbuchi, Kameda, and Agarie, 1989).

The perception about the fairness of practices in the workplace has also provided an opportunity to look at the perception of justice and retaliation against an organization, rather than an individual. The study site was a non-union, privately owned manufacturing plant. Perceptions of one's pay as unfair were associated with greater retaliation only when the individual perceived that the organization's formal procedures were unfair and when interpersonal treatment was poor. This indicates that when employees feel that policies are fair and that they are well treated, they are less likely to retaliate for perceived transgressions like inadequate or unfair pay. This is important in that it indicates that there are many contextual factors that help to decide the person's inclination towards retaliation and revenge (Skarlicki and Folger, 1997).

## WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

It seems likely that the centers of the brain connected with shame, empathy, rage and aggression are also the biological substrate for the

experience of vengeful feelings and impulses and for the control and inhibition of these impulses. It is conceivable that people who have suffered developmental insults in their early years may not only have *reasons* for feelings of vengeance towards others, but may be biologically predisposed to react violently when provoked. The right hemisphere appears to be intimately involved in the development of empathic processes. Children with structural damage to that hemisphere are extremely poor at perceiving the emotional states of others. In fact, prefrontal damage early in life may permanently impair empathic, moral, and social behavior, particularly right frontal damage. Some authorities have proposed that it is damage to these areas of the brain that underlies sociopathic behavior (Blair & Cipolotti, 2000). Along with empathic failure, people with sociopathic traits commonly display intense retaliatory urges that are unmodified by social inhibition. For such people, the desire for revenge becomes a driving force, irrespective of any other personal or social considerations.

Children raised in situations of disrupted attachment relationships, overt abuse, and exposure to aggressive models cannot develop the proper structures necessary to adequately modulate affective arousal, including shame and rage. If for instance, the child is subjected to ridicule, humiliation, or other forms of emotional abuse, shame may not function to diminish and modulate emotional arousal and rage but instead, may increase these toxic affects. If the emotion that is communicated by the mother in interaction with the child is too aggressive and terrifying, then the shame response can become dysfunctional. The level of shame that the parental behavior evokes becomes too intense and is therefore overwhelming for the child. In order to protect against the paralyzing impact of overwhelming shame, the child may resort to an “attack other” or “attack self” strategy producing retaliatory responses that may be deflected away from the original – and feared – source of the shaming behavior and redirected at innocent others and/or the self (Nathanson, 1992).

Later, when the child, adolescent or adult is presented with stimuli that are provocative, he or she is likely to pay special attention to the hostile cues and react with retaliatory aggression (Garbarino, 1999). Even many years later, the prototypical interactions of a contemptuous, aggressive, or enraged face on the part of another person may trigger a level of unmodulated arousal that is similar to the original levels of arousal and

distress in childhood. Horowitz has described the unmodulated blind rage that can result, *“Not thinking, all feeling. He wants to demolish and destroy persons who frustrate him. He is not aware of ever loving or even faintly liking the object. He has no awareness that his rage is a passion that will decline. He believes he will hate the object forever.”* (Horowitz as quoted in Schore, p. 341). Combined with a failure in the capacity for empathic regard for another, this rage can be devastating. *“The feeling of contempt toward a human being tends to depersonalize the target individual, to cause the person to be perceived as something less than human. It is because of these characteristics that contempt can motivate murder and mass destruction of people”* (Izard as quoted in Schore, 1994, p. 340). These are apt descriptions of someone possessed by a lust for vengeance.

At least part of the relationship between shame and revenge may be related to the sense of mastery, pride, competence and control that an infant appears to experience when mother interactively smiles on his or her accomplishments, as opposed to when mother disapproves and arouses shame. As one investigator notes, *“I regard the sense of efficacy as the core of the developing sense of self and traumatic disturbances in the sense of efficacy as core narcissistic injuries which predispose to significant psychopathology in the course of development”* (Broucek as quoted in Jones, 1995, p. 144). This sense of efficacy is in direct opposition to the sense of helplessness and failure that accompanies shame arousal as a result of contempt directed at the child’s efforts. Early in the course of development, shame becomes linked with the idea of an incompetent self and the earlier the link between shame and a particular personal attribute, the more primitive and unmodulated the affective reaction is likely to be (Nathanson, 1992). Fantasies and acts of revenge have the power to restore that lost sense of competence, strength, and mastery, at least temporarily. But if this sense of competence is unstable and fleeting, then further acts of real or perceived revenge that recreate a sense of power and competency, are likely to occur, creating a repetitive cycle of shame-attracting behavior followed by vengeful behavior.

When the parent increases the pain and humiliation of the child instead of empathizing and containing toxic affect, the child is forced to fall back on his or her own limited resources and in the process, fails to develop the full potential for empathy with others. Additionally, the child is

powerless to retaliate against the strong, powerful adults around him. From his position of relative helplessness, the more he tries to retaliate, the more likely he is to be punished. Few of his elders will recognize that in his aggressive, oppositional or defiant behavior, he is responding to hurt feelings in a way that is normal for a member of the human species. So the lust for vengeance must be suppressed, repressed, denied – and in the best cases, sublimated. The greater the hurt and the more fragile the empathic bond, the less likely it will be that the child will be able to successfully contain and sublimate his vengeful feelings and, therefore, the greater the likelihood that at some point in time, there will be a return of the repressed. For many adults who were emotionally abused as children, this will not occur until they are confronted with the helplessness and dependency of their own children, so like the feelings they too once experienced. As parents, they may identify with the rejecting, humiliating and aggressive behavior of their own parents, rather than with the child's helplessness and fears and in doing so, continue the intergenerational cycle of abuse, recognized here as the human reciprocity system gone wrong.

#### STUDIES OF CLINICAL POPULATIONS:

A preoccupation with seeking vengeance is not a sign of good mental health. Several studies conclude that a tendency to find comfort in fantasizing about revenge is associated with various forms of psychopathology (Greenwald & Harder, 1994; Zelin et al, 1983). Another group discovered that depressed women were more likely to retaliate against those who have betrayed them and they are more unable to avoid deflation in appraisals of their own actions after they have been betrayed (Haley and Strickland, 1986).

In a study of Vietnam combat veterans, distinguishing features were noted between the aggression of soldiers reacting adaptively to situations of real danger and a type of combat aggression that was personally motivated by a quest for revenge. Adaptive aggression posed few post-combat difficulties, but vengeful aggression resulted in regressive ego and superego functioning and led to uncontrolled rages, combat atrocities, and post-combat difficulties in the handling of hostility and aggression (Fox, 1974). Among a series of domestic murder-suicides, the two most common motives for the husband killing

his wife, and sometimes their children, were jealousy and revenge (Milroy, 1995).

### SHAME, GRIEF, AND REVENGE

Recently, theorists have begun to look more closely at the relationship between shame, aggression, and revenge behavior. Hans Toch studied violent men and found that the largest category was comprised of men who responded to any sign of disrespect or offense with retaliatory violence (Toch, 1992). The important emotion at work here is thought to be shame. Shame-prone people are the more likely than others to become angry, violent, and retaliatory when shamed. Once shame is aroused by some real or perceived criticism, the shame-prone person is unable to modulate his or her level of arousal and the sense of ensuing panic requires some kind of transformation, usually to anger directed at the source of the shame. This is a finding consistent with the notion that hostile and unstable care-taking can result in developmental insults to brain organization and failures in affect modulation that then carry over into adult life in the form of many different kinds of character pathology (Schoore, 1994).

In looking at the relationship between shame-proneness and constructive vs. destructive responses to anger among children, adolescents, college students and adults, shame-proneness was positively related to anger arousal and to both malevolent intentions (“felt like getting back at target of anger”) and fractious intentions (“felt like letting off steam”), but was not related to constructive intentions like fixing the situation (Tangney et al., 1996). Shame-proneness was also associated with destructive responses to anger including higher levels of direct physical, verbal, and symbolic aggression toward the target, indirect aggression like harming something important to the person, malediction as in talking maliciously behind the person’s back, displaced aggression, anger held in, and self aggression.

The relationship between shame and vengeance is particularly important in relation to the emotional abuse of children and adults. Emotional abuse is far less frequently recognized, documented or understood than other forms of abuse. Nonetheless, emotional abuse is no less likely to arouse overwhelming shame in the victim, and is deeply related to a sense of profound shame about the self, the very core of identity (Loring, 1994).

The connection between unresolved bereavement, a longing for death, or a sense of being dead, and the resolution through some kind of revenge goes back to human social evolutionary history and can be seen in tribal cultures. Barbara Ehrenreich (1997) describes tribes who often follow up natural deaths with retaliatory headhunting raids. The headhunting was called “killing to wipe one’s eyes,” and it was a means of getting even by making another household mourn instead (p. 138).

In historical literature we can find references to the close connection between suicide, grief, guilt, shame and the desire for vengeance. Sometimes, seeking revenge derails suicidal behavior, as aggression is turned outside and directed externally. In the Iliad, a classic revenge tale, Achilles becomes incensed at Agamemnon, the Greek King, who is using remarkably bad judgment in dealing with the proud and violent Achilles, the local hero. Agamemnon only avoids being vengefully killed by Achilles for what the latter perceives as insulting treatment, through the intervention of a goddess. With his pride hurt, and his desire for vengeance unfulfilled, Achilles refuses to fight for Agamemnon, thus guaranteeing severe losses for the Greeks. He stubbornly refuses Agamemnon’s apologies and when Achilles’ best friend, Patrocles, takes pity on all the soldiers who are dying without the intervention of their hero, Patrocles insists on wearing Achilles’ armor out into the battle so that the soldiers will believe that Achilles is there. Patrocles is killed in the battle while pretending to be Achilles, who is then devastated by his friend’s death, *“His grief was so great, that all were afraid that he would kill himself. But **the need for vengeance directed him away from self-destruction** . . . during the battle, the powerful force of Achilles’ anger burst forth and vengeance was directed indiscriminately towards all the enemy. Achilles spared no lives; showed no mercy, not even to those who pleaded for their lives . . . only death, even his own death, could make up for the death of his friend”* (Marongiu & Newman, 1987, pp. 31-32).

In Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”, we see a similar relationship between suicidality and vengeful behavior. Hamlet wavers between revenge and suicide, grief-stricken over the loss of his father under highly suspicious circumstances. Hamlet agonizes over what he must do and contemplates his own death. *“O that this too sullied flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d his cannon against self-slaughter. Oh God! Oh God! How weary, stale,*

*flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!”* (Act I, Scene II). Only when confronted by the ghost of his father demanding blood vengeance, does Hamlet begin to mobilize for violent, vengeful action that avenges his grief, but ultimately leads him to murder an innocent man, contribute to the death of others, and cause his own death.

At other times, suicide is a part of the fantasy of revenge. Charlotte Brontë noted the connection between vengeance and suicide in *Jane Eyre*. Jane is an orphan, violently bullied by a cousin. *“Unjust! – unjust!”, said my reason, forced by the agonizing stimulus into precocious though transitory power; and Resolve, equally wrought up, indicated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression – as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die”* (cited in Jacoby, 1983, p.49-50). Data from a number of societies indicate that domestic violence is a significant causal factor in female suicide. In some societies, female suicide is a culturally recognized behavior that enables the weak to influence the strong and/or take revenge on those who oppress them. When the social group does not respond adequately to the violence they are receiving, their suicide is designed to force the community to exact vengeance from the abusive husband (Counts, 1987).

Victims of abuse in childhood have enormous difficulties in grieving for the losses they have suffered. Adults who were maltreated as children carry around with them the impact of delayed, unresolved, “stigmatized” loss (Sprang & McNeil, 1995). Their losses cannot even be acknowledged as loss. Their grief is stigmatized because it is seen as a “blemish of individual character” (Goffman, 1963). The losses associated with childhood maltreatment that are only recognized or surfaced in adulthood are not considered legitimate reasons for grief, by the larger society. They are not “legitimate” mourners. Their grief is “disenfranchised” (Doka, 1989).

There are three general types of disenfranchised grievers: those individuals whose relationships are socially unrecognized, illegitimate, or in other ways unsanctioned; those persons whose loss does not fit the typical norms of appropriateness; and those people whose ability to grieve is in question or who are not considered to be legitimate grievers. Victims of child maltreatment experience many losses that

carry with them no social legitimacy. Victims of childhood maltreatment are frequently labeled as “whiners” or “complainers” who manipulate others with their “victim mentality.” The social attitude towards most losses, other than death, is generally, “get over it.” Victims of emotional abuse may have the most “disenfranchised” grief because the losses they have suffered are often intangible losses, the loss of what should have been, rather than the loss of what was but has now ceased to be (Bloom, in press).

Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that fantasies of revenge would color the recovery from childhood maltreatment. Mourning is one of the stages of recovery from trauma and fantasies of revenge and obtaining compensation as a form of exacting justice, are a relatively common resistance to doing grief work in the therapeutic process. As Judith Herman (1992) points out, revenge fantasies are often vivid and mirror the original trauma in which the victim retaliates in kind against the perpetrator.

## JUSTICE, INJUSTICE AND TAKING REVENGE AGAINST THE WORLD

As has been discussed, the notions of justice, of fair play, and of appropriate consequence for wrongdoing appear to be “built-in.” We see the earlier forms of our human sense of justice among primates and in the development of children. Piaget (1948) noted that even very young children have a sense of “immanent justice,” the beginnings of the concept of a just world in which people get what they deserve and that fault will automatically bring about its own punishment. Experiences with the family and social environment then form the child’s more mature sense of justice. The “belief in a just world,” as articulated by Lerner (1980, p.9) refers to the assumptions by which people orient themselves to their environment. The image of manageability and predictability that arises from this belief is central to the ability to engage in long-term goal oriented activity. Loss of this sense of manageability and predictability arouses overwhelming anxiety that inhibits or arrests normal cognitive, emotional, and social functioning.

Trauma, particularly interpersonal trauma, and most particularly that experienced at the hands of one's family members, often fragments or shatters this fundamental conceptual notion of a "just world." Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1992) has described the effect that trauma has on the victim's sense of fundamental meaning, including the sense of justice. Children raised in abusive homes must still make meaning out of the world they live in if they are to manage their environment. For the young child, the family represents the world. From childhood on, the external world will be perceived and understood through the lens of the family. By living in a family that functions by a set of rules that are unjust relative to the larger society, children may come to construe the world as fundamentally unjust. Alternately, they may come to believe that the world - as represented by their family - is just but that they are fundamentally flawed and therefore must deserve the treatment they are receiving. This attack on the self while preserving the intactness of the family is a common finding among emotionally abused children and adults (Loring, 1994). Quite commonly they do not even characterize the abuse as abuse, but instead understand their experience of maltreatment as a just and fair evaluation of their shortcomings and inadequacies. Either way, the sense that justice exists *somewhere*, is preserved and cognitive-emotional chaos is avoided.

In their study of vengeance, Marongiu and Newman point that *"all acts of vengeance arise from an elementary sense of injustice, a primitive feeling that one has been arbitrarily subjected to a tyrannical power against which one is powerless to act"* (1987, p. 9). The abuse of power on the part of the perpetrator and the helplessness experienced by the victim are hallmark characteristics of interpersonal violence and, therefore, we can expect that a victim will be highly motivated to seek revenge. The desire for vengeance/justice becomes a part of the trauma response and may be directed at the original perpetrator or may be displaced onto others, often those entirely innocent of the initial injury.

When justice is not forthcoming from a higher authority, people will and do take justice into their own hands. Acts of vengeance are the result. Punishment - retaliation, revenge - is the typical response to breaking the rules of justice. But there is a difference between punishment administered by authority that is deemed to be legitimate by the person who is being punished, and punishment administered by an individual avenger. In the mind of the vengeful person who believes he or she has

been abused, disrespected, or treated unfairly, the world is unjust and the punishment he or she receives is, therefore, undeserved. The world should be made to pay for this injustice, a mindset conducive to the avenger who “takes the law into his own hands.”

Some avengers may decide that his or her family is just and good but that the problems have been caused by an unjust external world. They are then more likely to protect their family and wreck vengeance on the external world. Others may discover that there is justice in the external world but that their family has betrayed them and these may wreck vengeance on their family. A third group of avengers may come to believe that justice prevails externally and that they are the source of the betrayal. This group is likely to wreck vengeance on themselves through all kinds of self-destructive behaviors. Emotional abuse is an insidious attack on the self. Children are easily brainwashed to believe that the abusive assessment of their character is accurate and therefore just and that the self is seriously flawed and deserving of punishment. These children are likely to direct their anger, desire for revenge, and search for justice towards punishment of the self that is labeled and perceived as bad. As adults, this may manifest as many different forms of self-destructive behavior including self-mutilative, and suicidal behavior.

In practice, most victimized people probably present with combinations of these beliefs and the behaviors that follow. As a result, the victim becomes the perpetrator in a cycle of revenge that has no prescribed limits. The original perpetrator rarely perceives that what he or she did to the victim was as bad as the victim experienced it to be. So, when the victim responds, the perpetrator experiences the response as an escalation of aggression, creating another cycle of revenge. When the original perpetrator is not the target of the revenge, the satisfaction that vengeance can give is a sense of dominance over the original perpetrator through the mechanism of displacement, while an innocent person becomes the victim, thus arousing the cycle of vengeance in yet another.

It is possible that many of the symptoms manifested in various mental disorders and the behaviors that we associate with violent criminal activity originate in a frustrated sense of righteous indignation and the search for justice and culminate in acts of vengeance against self and

others. James Gilligan, former director of the Center for the Study of Violence at Harvard Medical School and former medical director of the Bridgewater State Hospital for the criminally insane, has written movingly about the connection between violence, vengeance, and justice. He has pointed out that the motives and goals that underlie violent crime are the same as those that motivate the pursuit of justice – seeking justice by retaliating against those whom the criminal perceives have punished him unjustly. The criminal is trying to exact revenge for past injuries and injustices through violent means. *“The first lesson that tragedy teaches . . . is that all violence is an attempt to achieve justice, or what the violent person perceives as justice, for himself or for whomever it is on whose behalf he is being violent . . . Thus, the attempt to achieve and maintain justice, or to undo or prevent injustice, is the one and only universal cause of violence”* (Gilligan, 1996, pp.11-12). If the normal human urge to retaliate for wrong doing is the root of violence, then research studies should confirm that there is a relationship between violence experienced at the hands of others and violence directed against others.

## BULLYING

Traditionally, bullying describes direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting and stealing that are initiated by one or more students against a victim. Racially or ethnically-based verbal abuse and gender-based insults are also found in bullying situations. In addition to direct attacks, bullying may also be more indirect by causing a student to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion. The key component is that the physical or psychological intimidation occurs repeatedly over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and emotional abuse (Banks, 1998; Sudermann, Jaffe and Schiek, 1996). It is now recognized that bullying does not end in childhood. Instead, the child bully grows up to be the adult bully, someone who continues to emotionally abuse, intimidate and threaten other people at home, in the workplace, at school, and in the community.

As we would expect from the earlier discussion of normal development and empathic bonds, people who engage in bullying behaviors seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control and derive satisfaction from inflicting injury and suffering on others, seem to have little empathy for their victims, and defend their actions by saying that their victims

provoked them in some way (Banks, 1998). They appear to experience their own actions as justifiable acts of retaliation for perceived injustice. Homes where domestic violence occurs are the perfect environments for the creation of bullies. Studies indicate that bullies often come from homes where physical punishment is used, where the children are taught to strike back physically as a way to handle problems, and where parental involvement and warmth are lacking (Banks, 1998). This modeling of aggressive behavior may include use of physical and verbal aggression toward the child by parents, or use of physical and verbal aggression by parents toward each other (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

### CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Corporal punishment is the deliberate infliction of physical pain to the body of another person as a form of punishment, or retaliation for specific offences. The experience of corporal punishment is very much in the eye of the beholder. Consistent with what we know about “tit-for-tat” as a basic social mechanism, a child may experience physical punishment as an entirely just retaliation for his or her offence, and, therefore, not be driven to retaliatory rage. However, the inherent imbalance of power between child and adult lends itself to abuses of that power and over-retaliatory responses from the adults, particularly if they have experienced injustices themselves at the hands of their own parents when they were children. Although historically viewed as a necessary element for creating a self-disciplined and self-controlled child, more recent research provides evidence for quite contrary findings that may be related to a discussion of retaliatory cycles of vengeance-seeking behavior.

Researchers at the Family Research Lab wanted to test the hypothesis that when parents use corporal punishment to correct antisocial behavior in their children, that instead the punishment increases the same kind of behavior. They studied families for two years and found that parental physical punishment designed to stop antisocial behavior had the opposite effect (Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Sims, 1997). Children who receive corporal punishment in adolescence have an increased risk later in life of depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, alcohol abuse, physical abuse of children, and wife beating (Straus and Kantor, 1994).

Results of an eighteen-year longitudinal study of the effects of physical punishment were recently released. The study drew three major conclusions: (1) Those exposed to harsh or abusive treatment during childhood are an at-risk population for juvenile offending, substance abuse, and mental health problems; 2) much of this elevated risk arises from the social context within which harsh or abusive treatment occurs; (3) nonetheless, exposure to abuse appears to increase risks of involvement in violent behavior and alcohol abuse (Fergusson and Lynskey, 1997).

A series of studies has demonstrated the relationship between physical punishment and other forms of what can be viewed as displaced retaliatory aggression. Children whose parents hit them are twice as likely to attack a brother or sister. Adults who were hit as adolescents are more likely to hit their spouses. Teenagers who were hit by their parents are more likely to steal and physically assault someone. The more corporal punishment parents use, the greater the chances of delinquent behavior among their children. States where teachers are allowed to hit children have a higher rate of student violence. Corporal punishment and physical abuse overlap: the more a parent was hit as an adolescent, the greater the likelihood that the parent will physically abuse his or her own child (Straus, 1994).

### DELINQUENCY AND PRISON POPULATIONS

What about people known to be perpetrators? A growing body of evidence has clearly demonstrated the connection between physical abuse and many other problems including a significant impact on the likelihood of arrest for delinquency, adult criminality, and violence (Maxfield and Widom, 1996). Rivera and Widom looked at the official criminal histories for a large sample of substantiated cases of physical and sexual abuse and neglect - 908 cases - from the years 1967 through 1971 in a U. S. Midwestern county and compared them to individuals with no official record of abuse or neglect. Childhood victimization increased overall risk for violent offending and particularly increased risk for males and blacks (1990). Then Luntz and Widom looked at all these cases to see if they could uncover the incidence of antisocial personality symptoms in adulthood. They were able to interview 699 young adults, 416 who had been abused or neglected and 283 comparison subjects. They discovered that childhood victimization was

a significant predictor of the number of lifetime symptoms of antisocial personality disorder and of a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder (1994).

According to one recent study of a delinquent population, a history of maltreatment increased the risk of youth violence by 24%. For each type of family violence – partner violence, a family climate of hostility, and child maltreatment - adolescents who live in violent families have higher rates of self-reported violence than do youngsters from non-violent families. The effect of multiple forms of violence is even more dramatic. While 38 percent of the youngsters from non-violent families reported involvement in violent delinquency, this rate increased to 60 percent for youngsters whose family engaged in one of these forms of violence. For those exposed to two forms of family violence, the rate increased to 73 percent and further increased to 78 percent for adolescents exposed to all three forms of family violence. Exposure to multiple forms of family violence, therefore, doubles the risk of self-reported youth violence (Thornberry, 1994).

Childhood abuse and neglect have a significant impact on the likelihood of arrest for delinquency, adult criminality, and violence. By the age of 32 years, almost half of the victims of abuse and neglect were arrested for a non-traffic offence. In another study of 213 adolescent delinquents, results indicated that violent offenders had higher rates of exposure to serious physical abuse, and weapons violence between adults, than controls and those who denied violence. Exposure to serious violence also was associated with lower self-reported competence, attitudes more supportive of aggression, and more use of aggressive control as a form of coping (Spaccarelli, Coatsworth and Bowden, 1995). Another group of researchers studied children aged 9-14 years of age who were sexual offenders. The sex offenders were found to exhibit a significant history of nonsexual antisocial behavior, physical abuse, and psychiatric comorbidity - 65% of the boys had been sexually abused (Shaw et al., 1993).

Dr. Dorothy Lewis and her colleagues (1989) have been studying the effects of delinquency. In a follow-up study of 95 formerly incarcerated delinquents, all but six of the subjects had adult criminal records. The average number of adult offences was 11.58. Juvenile violence alone did not distinguish well between those who would and would not go on to

adult violent crime. Seventy-seven percent of the more violent juveniles and 61% of the less violent juveniles committed adult aggressive offences.

We know relatively little about the psychology of violent prison populations. If the goal of aggression is acquisition – as in larceny and fraud - and in the process, someone gets hurt, this is not considered a retaliatory act – although it certainly may elicit one. However, if the primary goal is to hurt someone, revenge is considered the impetus for reactive aggression. Challeen(1986), Gilligan (1996), Lewis (1998), Wachtler (1997) and Pincus (2001) have all provided vivid examples of the culture of violence and revenge that characterizes the homes that inmates come from and the prisons that they populate. Dr. Jonathan Pincus has studied over 150 murderers over twenty-five years and concludes that their violence is a complex mix of genetics, brain injury, and a past history of childhood maltreatment (2001). We are just beginning to understand something about the connections between shame and anger management, and the desire for vengeance in this population. In one study, 26 male prison inmates were trained in anger management using cognitive behavioral methods. Inmates showed a significant reduction in a desire to seek revenge (Holbrook, 1997).

In a study of serial rapists serving time in U.S. prisons, 56.1% were judged to have at least one forced or exploitative abuse experience in boyhood, as compared to a study of 2,972 college males reporting 7.3% experiencing boyhood sexual abuse. Also, the rapist sample revealed higher rates of a family member as an abuser compared to the college sample. When they obtained more details from the men on their sexual activities as boys, they found that 51% re-enacted their own abuse as preadolescents with their earliest victims being girls they knew in the neighborhood, their sisters, or a girlfriend. It is obvious that a displaced desire for revenge is a strong motivation in these cases. Rape fantasies in mid-adolescence emerged as behaviors of spying, fetish burglaries, molestations, and rapes. Finally, the repetition of these juvenile behaviors established a pattern of criminal behavior as they sought out their next group of victims – strangers (Burgess et al., 1988).

## THE PROBLEM WITH REVENGE

*Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.*

Francis Bacon, Essays, On Revenge

As quoted in S. Jacoby, 1983, p.1

Threats of suicide, suicide attempts, self-mutilation, risk-taking behaviors, and many other forms of self-destructive behaviors are a frequent accompaniment of trauma-related disorders. Frequently these behaviors do not respond to treatment until the patient comes to recognize the identification with the perpetrator that lies concealed within the self-destructive behavior. Often, these thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are a defense against confronting overwhelming feelings of loss and traumatic bereavement. Grieving is often the most difficult stage of recovery (Bloom, 1997; 2000a,b; in press). According to some traditional psychiatric accounts, suicide can sometimes be seen as expressing the desire for revenge, an aggression or partial killing of those who remain behind (Menninger, 1963).

Victims of violence, loss, and betrayal, like the literary figures mentioned earlier, struggle against powerful feelings of shame, guilt, grief, the desire for revenge, and the deathlike numbing that often accompanies prolonged exposure to trauma. As victims, they have been helpless against the powerful perpetrator and their inability to protect themselves and others leads to both shame and guilt. Honor, pride, identity can only be restored by reclaiming competence – and yet reclaiming a perceived sense of competence often means unwittingly assuming the mantle of the perpetrator. Some try to dance with death through risk-taking, playing Russian roulette games with their own bodies. Others shed their own blood, defying the world to see them as cowards. Others wreck their lives on the shoals of alcohol or drug abuse, often savaging the lives of their family as well.

Fantasies of revenge can be a form of torment for the survivor of child maltreatment because they can make the victim feel like an even greater monster than the perpetrator. In the course of recovery, the victim must give up the desire to “get even” while holding on to or rebuilding the sense that a just world is still possible. Fantasizing that one will be compensated for one's losses is another way of avoiding the

mourning process. The victim may generalize the sense of being entitled to compensation to others besides the perpetrator and to the world in general. This sense of entitlement to vengeance or to compensation can become so potent that the victim may unwittingly begin to treat others the way she or he was originally treated by the perpetrator.

The inherent problem with revenge is that no injured individual is in the position of applying a balanced solution to a wrong that has been done to him or her, a fair retaliation. The problem of vengeance is a problem that must be shared and resolved in the complex interaction between the individual and his or her social group.

Acts of revenge can be viewed as much a failure of the social group as a failure of the individual. Revenge is “wild justice,” justice gone wrong. Revenge takes over when laws – and the institutions that support those laws – fail. *“A society that is unable to convince individuals of its ability to exact atonement for injury is a society that runs a constant risk of having its members revert to the wilder forms of justice”* (Jacoby, 1983, p. 10). Revenge, however, is not particularly sweet. In fact, even the quotation is used wrongly. What Milton actually said was *“Revenge, at first though sweet, Bitter ere long back on itself recoils”* (as cited in Jacoby, 1983, p. 15). Revenge turns victim into perpetrator and the recognition of this reality pervades Western literature. *Hamlet*, considered by many to be Shakespeare’s most famous – and for us, most modern – play relates the enormous consequences that occur when a young man as a lone individual is compelled to avenge his murdered father because of a fundamental failure of the law and its institutions: *“When the burden of revenge is assigned to lawful authority, victims still have the psychic satisfaction of seeing their assailants’ punishment, but society is protected from the violent passions of unchecked avengers and avengers themselves are protected from a weight that frequently proves too great for the more gentle side of human nature”* (Jacoby, 1983, p. 43).

## SUMMARY

In summary, there are many implications that can be drawn from the material that has been covered. The primate data informs us that retaliatory and conciliatory behavior is a fundamental part of our social

and evolutionary makeup. Tit-for-tat implies that human relationships require balance and reciprocity – the stick of retaliation and the carrot of forgiveness. We learn from children that a sense of justice appears to be built-in, beginning to manifest as early as year one. Human beings never lose this sense of fair play and outrage when the rules of justice are violated. Psychobiological findings teach us that by failing to provide environments that are conducive to a child's healthy and safe development, we plant the seeds of vengeful and destructive behavior. Feelings of revenge are normal responses to violation. If the child's brain has not been able to develop the appropriate inhibition of excitatory impulses, then losing control over vengeful desires is made more likely. History warns us that for humans, vengeance breeds vengeance, and that the notion of hereditary responsibility leads to endless vendetta and the escalation of conflict. History also teaches us that the law has been able to exert control over the expression of revenge through acting vengefully. This punishing aspect of social organization has helped control aggression but it may not have actually decreased it, as evidence by the vengeful nature of this century's major conflicts. To the extent that a society fails to follow the rules of fair play in accordance with its own standards, as applied to all its members, that society will provide a breeding ground for vengeful behavior on the part of its members.

Studies of normal populations demonstrate that shame induces feelings of revenge and that people will even risk substantial loss for the gain they hope to experience from satisfying the need for revenge. Studies have shown that explaining the mitigating factors of a perpetrator's behavior can lessen the desire for revenge, but only if that information is given early in the victim's cycle of arousal, and may only work for behaviors that are not severely harmful. When people feel that revenge is morally justified, they feel little shame or guilt about it and they tend to feel this way when they believe the perpetrator has willfully and intentionally harmed them. Once someone is already very upset and physiologically aroused, they appear less able to take in information that may mitigate the perpetrator's behavior. If someone has been hurt, empowering him in relation to the perpetrator also appears to diminish the desire for revenge. Apologies help as well, but possibly only under conditions of mild rather than severe harm. All of these studies validate

how important it is to take into account emotional abuse as a source of very real pain and, therefore, a source of motivation for revenge.

From clinical populations we learn that revenge may not be good for your health – at least not fantasies of revenge and we learn that the expression of vengeful aggression may lead to further problems when the victim becomes a perpetrator. Shame appears to play a vital role in the proneness of an individual to respond vengefully. The more shame-prone a person, the more likely they are to become angry, hold malevolent intentions, and feel like fighting. This may be related to a decreased sense of mastery and competence that the shame-prone person frequently experiences and a common reaction to such helplessness may be to attack another, since the act of attacking provides a feeling of power.

Traumatic experience by definition occurs in a situation of helplessness and this loss of efficacy and the shame that attends it, is quite likely to evoke wishes, fantasies, and acts of revenge. Central to all interpersonal trauma is the concept of justice betrayed and the shattering of belief in a just world. That sense of justice must be reconstituted in order for the survivor to recover. The more injustice, or contradictions in justice that the person has experienced, the more difficult this task may be. Abuse and neglect in childhood leave an individual vulnerable biologically, psychologically, socially and morally to the effects of unrequited justice. Many outcomes can be predicted from this complex interaction. Clearly violence directed at others and homicidal behavior can be seen as acts of vengeance. However, suicide, self-destructive acts like self-mutilation, risk-taking behaviors, addictions, abuse of power, involvement in abusive relationships, an inability to protect children – all may be manifestations of vengeful feelings, unmet needs for justice, and misdirected aggression. A large and growing body of research indicates that there is indeed a close connection between antisocial forms of acting-out, violence, and crime and earlier experiences with victimization, particularly in childhood.

## CONCLUSION

Many people sense that the justice system as it is now comprised, is not working. According to an article in the Los Angeles Times (Kelleher, 1996) quoting a Los Angeles psychologist and lawyer, Rex Julian Beaber, *“Revenge as a popular tool to resolve human conflict has reemerged from primitive time as a rescission of the social contract. In the eyes of most people, the state has failed. Civil justice, governed by rules that have become so arcane and technical that who wins has nothing to do with the crime – is expensive, inefficient and totally unpredictable. Likewise for criminal justice”* (p.3).

The next evolutionary step in the problem of revenge may come about not by eliminating the thirst for vengeance, a search that is simultaneously a quest for justice, but through revising our definitions of justice and revenge. Our present system of justice is based on the notion of retribution – revenge cloaked in social acceptability. The justice system reflects a fundamental imbalance of power between administrators of justice and those under its purview, just as a fundamental power imbalance exists between parents and children. The primary questions to be answered under the present rules are “What laws were broken?” and “Who broke them?” and “What punishment do they deserve?” Not surprisingly these are also the typical questions addressed towards children by authority figures. Retributive justice is preoccupied with blame, pain, and punishment, is primarily negative and backward-looking and the victim plays little if any role in achieving justice, nor is there much respect for the justice-seeking aspects of the perpetrator’s behavior.

But there may be other possibilities for satisfying and balancing the needs of the victim, the perpetrator, and the social order. In a contrasting system of *restorative* justice, the focus is on the restoration of relationship as well as individual and social healing (Bianchi, 1995; Zehr, 1990, 1994). The first question addressed is “Who has been hurt?” Once this is established, the next consideration is “What are the needs of the victims, the offenders, and the community?” The final question is “What are the obligations and whose are they?” Under these kinds of guidelines, the aim of justice is to meet needs and promote healing, not to punish, although punishment, including imprisonment, can be recommended if it can be demonstrated to serve the purposes of the

three involved parties – the victim, the perpetrator, and the social group. This is not an approach that can be reduced to a simple dichotomy of “liberal” vs. “conservative” or “soft” vs. “hard” on crime. It requires a radical shift in the basic assumptions upon which we define what justice *is* and how is justice to be best obtained.

We must consider the possibility that the high rates of crime we have seen grow since the end of World War II may be related to unmet needs for justice manifesting as rampant revenge. As we learn that substantial proportions of violent criminals grow up in violent homes, suffer extremes of poverty, and are victims of other forms of social injustice, we are compelled to question the inequities and failure of a system that allows so many children to live in unprotected, unjust circumstances. This may be particularly important factor as the gap has grown between the reality of these victims and the definition of justice in the external world, and as information technology has spread an awareness of these discrepancies into every home. The momentum for human rights took wing after the Holocaust, and though the United States has still failed to sign the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, movements directed at guaranteeing the rights of women and children have played a significant role in creating domestic violence and child protection legislation. The United States fought the wars of this century, including the Cold War, under a banner that said that we represent democracy, equal opportunity, and social justice and yet many children in the U.S. experience a reality quite different from this one. This discrepancy between family justice, practiced social justice and the articulation of ideal social justice may create even more outrage than in previous eras among those who are still being violated in abusive homes. This sense of outrage, unvalidated and ignored, becomes a breeding ground for vigilante justice – acts of outrageous violence born out of shame, despair, desperation and an unrequited desire for justice and fairplay.

The evolution of revenge has taken us from tribal justice based on kinship and hereditary blood vengeance, to a world of laws in which the criminal justice system exacts its own form of legalized revenge. The unrelenting violence of this century – may finally propel us to confront the cost of victimizing other people – regardless of whether that victimization is the result of criminal actions or is legally endorsed by the State; of whether that victimization is the result of parental

“discipline” or overt abuse; of whether that victimization is physical, emotional, social, or economic; of whether it occurs at school, in the workplace, or at home. Insisting that the cycle of violence be stopped, that we get off this apocalyptic merry-go-round of revenge may, in the end, be our salvation.

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