

## **Vindictive Behavior: A Qualitative Inquiry into Causes and Consequences among University Students**

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### **Abstract**

Previous studies have linked vindictive behavior with emotional instability, anger, narcissism and lack of empathy and forgiveness, but still individuals frequently express this tendency. This exploratory inquiry was undertaken to investigate tendency, causes, and consequences of exhibiting vindictive behavior among university students in Pakistan. An open-ended structured interview schedule was employed to achieve the objectives of the present study. The sample comprised of 44 participants, including 57% women students. The ages of the respondents ranged from 17 to 47. Analysis suggested that 68% participants admitted tendency for vindictiveness while 32% reported being vengeful sometimes. Interestingly, none of the participants reported being never vindictive. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. According to the participants, people show vengeful behavior mainly because they are hurt or they want reinstate their power. The participants also agreed that vindictive behavior destroys relationships and can result in psychological and emotional problems and can reduce satisfaction with life. The present study provides preliminary evidence for tendency in individuals for vindictive behavior irrespective of the fact that such behavior might be socially considered undesirable. The findings provide direction for advanced qualitative investigations.

**Keywords: vindictive behavior, qualitative inquiry, thematic analysis, exploratory study**

### **Introduction**

Vindictive behavior, a tendency to reciprocate perceived social offence or emotional injury is a complex behavior, which has withstood temporal and spatial variations over centuries. Despite the fact that it has been linked with several destructive behaviors including war and conflict, criminal behavior, psychopathology, emotional dis-regulation, human beings have as yet not tempered the desire for vengeance and revenge. Research indicates that provocative transgressions such as bullying, humiliation, injustice and discrimination are quite common phenomena in family, social groups, schools and colleges, and workplace and organizations. Most of such experiences instill a desire for revenge or vengeful behavior. Thus, it is imperative for researchers to study in detail the causes and consequences of vindictive behavior in indigenous setting. The purpose of the present study was threefold: a) to determine the tendency of vindictive behavior in general population, b) to examine the causes of vindictive behavior, and lastly c) to explore social and emotional consequences of vindictiveness.

## Literature Review

It is amazing to note that so many international and interpersonal conflicts can be associated with revenge and urges for vindictive behavior. As noted by Schumann and Ross (2010), history is profusely filled with vengeful acts and conducts. Among other factors, revenge has been a prominent motivator behind many wars and conflicts in the world and over boundaries and between societies. Even very recently, cultural feuds and violation of norms have also sparked the need for vengeance and retaliation in many societies such as Albania (Lanchin, 2008), China (WuDunn, 1993), Yemen (White, 2008). Killing one's own family members especially women and girls and members of other clans to avenge immoral transgressions are quite common in some communities of Pakistan and appreciated also.

Shteynberg, Gelfand, and Kim (2009) compared American students with Korean students to explore the reasons for vindictive behavior. Their study came up with interesting findings: American students tend to exhibit vindictiveness when they feel their rights are violated, which makes them angry, whereas Korean students became vengeful when they feel either they are humiliated and embarrassed or any of their family members. They concluded that anger was the prime motivator of vengeance among individualistic societies while shame triggered vengeful behavior in collectivistic cultures and that it is 'more contagious in collectivistic cultures' as embarrassments of individuals with similar identity is experienced like ones' own. Lastly, gender differences have also been reported on vindictive behavior. Stuckless and Goranson (1992) found that men were more vindictive compared women.

Schumann and Ross (2010) summarized that vindictive behavior may not be as much an impulsive behavior as we would like to believe, instead different options are weighed by the victims before they react to a wrongdoing, for instance, relative advantages and disadvantages of retaliation, whether the perpetrators qualifies a response, the intensity of anger experienced by the victim, the status and the position of the transgressor etc. Moreover, studies have suggested that victims are less likely to be vengeful if the perpetrator apologizes (Exline, DeShea, & Holeman, 2007) and if the apology is perceived by the victim to be sincere (Lazare, 2004). Research related to organizational behavior and international relations suggests that people and nations are not likely to avenge injustice if they perceive the opponent as more powerful and strong. Aquino, Tripp, and Bies (2006) noted that this inhibitory factor might play an important role in starting of nuclear war or stop an employee to avenge transgression of their bosses (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). Later, studies also reported that 'for every act of lethal vengeance, there are likely scores of restrained acts of revenge between workplace colleagues (Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002), and friends and family (Yoshimura, 2007).

McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, and Mooney (2001) observed that mainly there are three motivations that a person tries to achieve by being vengeful: to restore moral balance; to return the transgressor what he or she deserves; and to reestablish one's self-esteem. Despite the fact that vindictive behavior has been observed to put the avenger in emotional and social disadvantages (Brown, 2004; Price, 2009), Schumann and Ross (2010) have asked then why vengeance to provocation is so common? Schumann and Ross (2010) and Bloom (2001) have argued that the whole history of human beings is replete with vengeful acts from macro level to micro level. Crombag, Rassin, and Horselenberg (2003) studied the frequency of desire to avenge a wrong doing among undergraduate students ( $n=513$ ). Their investigation showed that 64% of the participants were able to recall an occasion when they felt the urge to show vindictive behavior in the previous year. Another study analyzed the responses of Albanian primary victims of genocide (Cardoza, et al., 2000). The data depicted that almost 50% of the respondents showed a strong urge for revenge. Similarly, in a survey after 9/11 incident, 90% American respondents

supported attack on Afghanistan in retaliation (Newport, 2001). Schumann and Ross after reviewing these findings, concluded that ‘revenge is a fairly common response to harm.’

Price (2009) highlighted the potential benefits of revenge, referring to the phenomena as ‘the revenge paradox,’ to explain the apparently usual practice of vindictive behavior. He proposed that people generally report that vindictiveness help to achieve the goal of catharsis after experiencing unjustified injury. According to the theory of Equity, revenge helps reduce the distress resulting from being a victim to transgression. While, another benefit observed with vindictiveness is restoration of self-esteem. Frijda (1994) reported that the victims of transgression perceive that the transgressor does not consider the victim worthy of respect, therefore, retaliation helps to strike power balance between them and restore the self-esteem of victim. Another explanation has emerged from Fehr and Gechter who have utilized evolutionary theory to propose their hypothesis (as cited in Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008). According to their theorization, “punishing others in this context---what is referred to as ‘altruistic punishment’---is a way to keep societies working smoothly—you are willing to sacrifice your well-being in order to punish someone who misbehaved.”

### ***Method***

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, a survey research method was employed following the methodology recommended by Crombag et al. (2003) and McClullough et al. (2001). Interview technique was used to gain responses individually on following questions: a) have you ever shown vindictive behavior? b) why do people show vindictive behavior? c) what are the emotional and social consequences of showing vindictive behavior? And lastly, d) do you think that social relationships are affected because of vindictive behavior? After data collection, the responses were listed separately for each question and were presented to three judges who were familiar with the technique of thematic analysis. The judges were instructed to identify the major themes in the responses along with recording frequency for each.

### ***Procedure & Participants***

The sample size for a qualitative study, 44 working men ( $n = 19$ ) and women ( $n = 25$ ). The participants’ age range was between 17 to 47 ( $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ). The mean personal/family income for students amounted to PKR 43435 ( $SD = 40,000$ ) per month, while 21 participants belonged to nuclear family system and rest belonged to joint family system. Before data collection, permission was sought from relevant authorities and informed consent was obtained from the participants. After assuring confidentiality, the participants were approached through employing convenient sampling procedure.

### ***Results & Discussion***

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentages calculated for the characteristics of the participants of this study.

**Table 1**  
***Frequencies and Percentages for Demographic Characteristics (N=44)***

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Groups</b>	<b>f (%)</b>
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<b>Age Range</b>	17-63	17-47 (M = 20)
<b>Gender</b>	Men	19
	Women	25
<b>Income</b>	Personal/Family	PKR 12,000-110000 (M = 43435.90)
<b>Family System</b>	Nuclear	21
	Joint	23

Table 2 shows the themes in the responses and their frequencies and percentages. The results depict that among the total, 68% of the respondents reported that they exhibit vindictiveness, while 32% admitted that sometimes they show this behavior. None of the respondents stated that they do not avenge a transgression. Approximately 91% of the participants believe that taking revenge affects social relationships; 5% think that retaliation does not impact relationships while around 2% believe that things can be reconciled after vindictive acts. 2% reported that they did not know if vindictive behavior had an impact on relationships. Table 2 also indicates the reasons and emotional and social consequences of vengeance as reported by the participants.

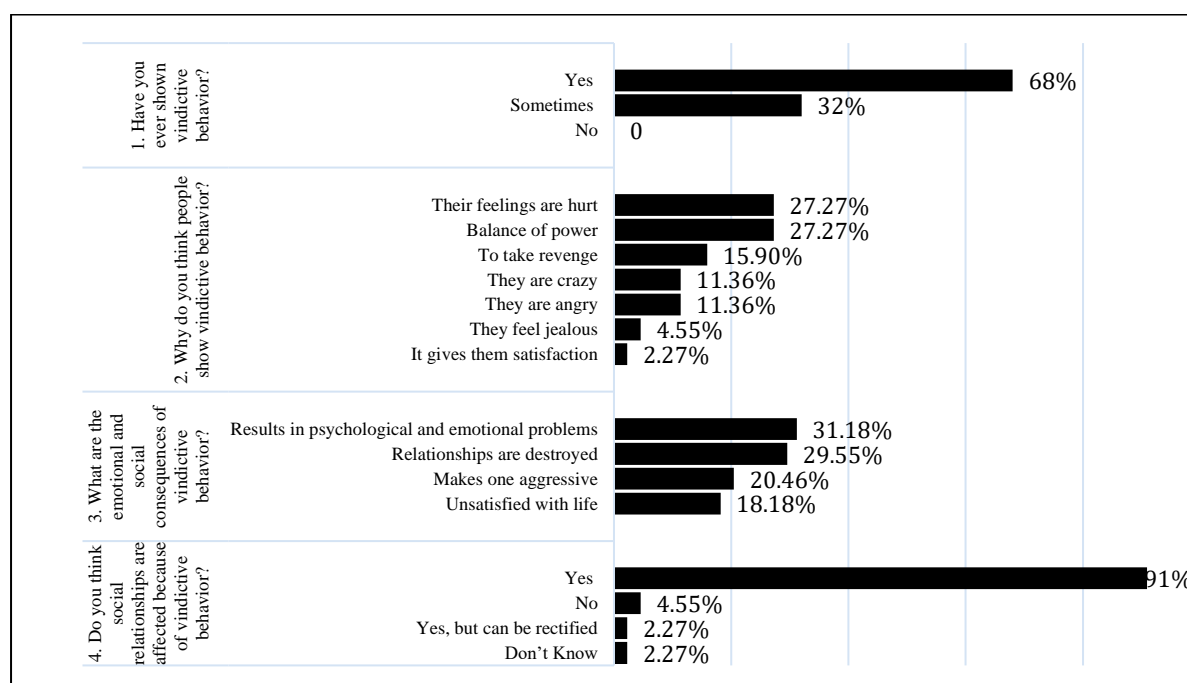
Two major reasons of vindictiveness distinctively emerged in thematic analysis. Around 27% participants narrated that people show vindictive behavior because their feelings are hurt or they want to regain their self-esteem by attempting to become equal. Other reasons include revenge (16%), anger (11%), and jealousy (5%). Around 11% reported that they think people who retaliate are crazy. Lastly, 2% noted that since it gives them satisfaction, that's why people are vengeful. Among the various emotional and social consequences of vindictive behavior, 31% related that exhibiting vindictiveness results in psychological and emotional problems. 30% specified that vindictiveness destroys relationships whereas, 21% believed that exhibiting vindictiveness makes one angry and aggressive while rest of the respondents reported that vengeful behavior leads to non-satisfaction with life.

**Table 2**  
*Frequencies and Themes for Study Questions (N=44)*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Responses/Themes</b>	<b>Frequencies</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>1. Have you ever shown vindictive behavior?</b>	Yes	30	68
	Sometimes	14	32
	No	0	0
<b>2. Why do you think people show vindictive behavior?</b>	Their feelings are hurt	12	27.27
	Balance of power	12	27.27
	To take revenge	7	15.90
	They are crazy	5	11.36
	They are angry	5	11.36
	They feel jealous	2	4.55
	It gives them satisfaction	1	2.27
<b>3. What are the emotional and social consequences of vindictive behavior?</b>			

Results in psychological and emotional problems	14	31.18
Relationships are destroyed	13	29.55
Makes one aggressive	9	20.46
Unsatisfied with life	8	18.18
<b>4. Do you think social relationships are affected because of vindictive behavior?</b>		
Yes	40	90.91
No	2	4.55
Yes, but can be rectified	1	2.27
Don't Know	1	2.27

**Figure 1: Percentages for Responses and Themes on Study Questions (N = 44)**



## Discussion

The findings indicate high frequency for vindictive behavior in our participants. As discussed above, Crombag et al. (2003) surveyed a large sample of Dutch students ( $n = 513$ ) in which the participants were asked to recall an event in which they felt vengeful and to relate if they acted on it or not, what was the purpose for doing so, and how did they feel later. Mostly the respondents confirmed that they responded to the recalled transgression at behavioral level. Most of the participants also reported that the prime purpose of their vengeful act was to re-establish their self-esteem; a small number stated that they did so to ‘get even with the perpetrator.’ Similar results were obtained in the present study, all participants agreed that they act out on their vengeful feelings, with none of them stating otherwise. “..because their (victims) feelings are hurt” and “..to reinstate self-esteem and bring balance in power” were recognized by the respondents among the top two reasons for vindictive behavior in the present study. In addition, other causes attributed to vindictiveness included revenge, abnormality, anger, and jealousy.

The respondents of the present study affirmed that acting on one's vengeful urges excessively disturbs social relationships and causes great distress and emotional difficulties. Crombag and colleagues (2003) also found that though initially, vindictiveness made their participants feel good, the researchers noted that it was a fleeting feeling of satisfaction, 'in the end taking action had not made their residual vengeful feelings subside any faster than those of respondents who had not acted on them.' Substantial studies have suggested the connection between vindictiveness and psychopathology (see, for instance, Khalid, Ashraf, & Azaad, 2021; Khalid, Ashraf, & Batool, 2021).

In another study, Carlsmith (2008) conducted an investment game experiment with university students in which cooperation between participants helped them to earn some money to be distributed equally but defection (i.e., not investing money himself/herself but convincing others to invest) would increase the monetary reward on the expense of others. As planned, Carlsmith planted confederates in the study who defected during the experiment and earned more money. In the next step, Carlsmith provided some opportunity to participants to take revenge. Though almost all the respondents took revenge, they also reported not feeling good later. Carlsmith (2008) suggested that perhaps the link between revenge and further emotional upheaval is mediated by the tendency to ruminate; when we don't take revenge, we trivialize things and forget and forgive. On the other hand, he further proposed, once we retaliate or show a response, things cannot be ignored, therefore, we think continuously about it, refueling it constantly with our thoughts and remain in a state of perpetual anger. He concluded: rather than providing closure, revenge does the opposite; it keeps the wound open and fresh.

Putting all data together, it is interesting to note that despite the fact that respondents of present study realize that vindictive behavior negatively affects social relationships and results in psychological and emotional problems, a high frequency of desire for vengeance was reported by them. Numerous theorists have attempted to explain the paradox related with vindictive behavior: if it causes different intensities of discomforts and interpersonal conflicts then why people keep on showing this behavior?

One explanation has emerged from evolutionary perspective. Carlsmith (2008) hypothesizes that the process of evolution has perhaps wired our minds that revenge is good; as punishing a misbehavior will help us to keep the society to work smoothly. Another explanation may come from Social Learning Theories, which have been sadly ignored to explain vindictive behavior. On the basis of fundamental principle of modeling (Bandura, 1969), it can be suggested that if a child has observed significant others to habitually respond in this manner to even minutest offence, being vengeful will appear to be his/her natural response though learned on the principles of observation and modeling, especially if they also lack the ability to take another's perspective and regulate feelings accordingly. Lastly, Mckee and Feather (2008) has proposed that in societies and groups where lawlessness is high, individuals learn to acquire justice by taking things in to their hands. In fact, Gelfand has observed that cultures where high stakes are placed on vengeful behavior in response to hurt ego and pride of a family or tribe, vindictiveness may be viewed as an approved way to ensure moral order.

## **Conclusion**

The present study was intended to gain a deeper understanding of vindictive behavior and its relationship with mental health and behaviors, which may inhibit the tendency for vengeance. It is expected that the results of the study will be used to plan further investigations to develop psychological mechanisms to inhibit retaliatory responses and enhance conciliatory behaviors.

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