Hatred and Revenge

Jessica Woolliscroft

Revenge has three basic characteristics: a feeling of hate in response to an injury (either real or perceived); an act of retaliation towards whoever is held to be responsible for that injury; and an inability to be satisfied by the retaliatory act. Although it does appear that the act of revenge is some kind of striving for justice, the reality is that the act remains unsatisfying. A vengeful person is implacable and cannot be appeased. No matter what punishment is meted out, the feeling of hate remains — fuelling further reprisals.

In contrast, when just retribution is sought for an injury, the injured party is capable of being appeased. The transgressor can make some form of reparation and, if it is acceptable, this reparation frees both parties. The injured party has been recompensed and will no longer seek retribution. The transgressor has 'paid his dues' and can move on without fear of reprisals.

Robert Hall, a writer on gestalt therapy, describes how a healthy organism seeks satisfaction at each level of functioning, that completion is sought so that energy can be freed up for the next experience. Described in this way, the experience of revenge could be seen as a 'stuck point' in the cycle of experience.

Whereas reparation is an acknowledgement of the hurt caused and allows both parties to complete the experience and move on, revenge will not accept reparation, the feeling of hate continues and completion is impossible. A loop is formed in the cycle of experience. Both parties are trapped in a spiral of hate and retaliation. The vendetta.

The Cycle of Experience

Injury → hurt → reparation → satisfaction → completion (forgiveness?) → new experiences

The Cycle of Revenge (The Vendetta)

Injury → hate → revenge → dissatisfaction → no completion → hate → revenge

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Many of us are warned about the damage caused by such 'negative' emotions as hate. Church groups counsel forgiveness, self-help psychology books and tapes talk about transforming hate into love. These 'negative' emotions are blamed for everything from a poor bank balance to cancer. There is always the danger that we may try to forgive prematurely and that deep feelings of anger and hatred are then denied. As described above, the revenge loop is unsatisfying. However, denying feelings does not enable us to escape the revenge loop. Instead the disowned feelings are banished to the shadows where they continue to affect relationships just as before — only this time outside awareness.

An alternative approach to 'trying to forgive' people we hate, or wish to be revenged upon, might be to attempt to understand what we are trying to communicate through our wish for revenge. What are we seeking when we exact punishment over and over again? What does it mean that we are implacable? We know that revenge stems from the feeling of hatred in response to an injury. However, it could be said that hatred is not an automatic response to being injured and that a more natural response would be to feel hurt. To understand how, instead of feelings of hurt, hatred can become an automatic response to injury, we need to understand the experience of hate.

Harry Guntrip, in his book, *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self*, writes 'What is the meaning of hate? It is not the absolute opposite of love; that would be indifference, having no interest in a person, not wanting a relationship and so having no reason for either loving or hating, feeling nothing. Hate is love grown angry because of rejection. We can only really hate a person if we want their love.'

One way of understanding hate is to see it as our attempt to cope with a hostile and rejecting world. When we want love from someone who will not give it, especially when we are completely dependent on that person (as a very young child is dependent on its parents), the experience is quite unbearable. On the very deepest level, it cannot be accepted, because it is so threatening to be rejected by those upon whom we are so dependent. Good experiences are nurturing and naturally assimilated as memories. They are enjoyed at the time, the experience is satisfying and leaves no problems. In gestalt terminology, the experience is complete and there is no 'unfinished business' . However, when someone will not love us, there is an interruption, a jolt to the system. We truly cannot accept this person's 'badness' for not loving us. This is not cussedness on our part, it is more that an infant cannot contemplate having its needs denied without experiencing severe trauma. This lack of acceptance means that the experience cannot be assimilated naturally as memories, it can only be assimilated as a 'bad object' that is for ever rejecting, indifferent or hostile to us according to our outer experience. Harry Guntrip describes the process as follows: 'You may become angry and enraged at the frustration and want to make an aggressive attack on the bad object to force it to become good and stop frustrating you — like a small child who cannot get what he wants from the mother and who flies into a temper tantrum and hammers on her with his fists. This is the

problem of hate, or love made angry. It is an attack on a hostile, rejecting, actively refusing bad object.'

In *The Uses of Enchantment* Bruno Bettelheim explains how children can be consumed with feelings of hate and revenge fantasies and that this is quite normal. This occurs even when parenting has been 'good enough' for, however much parents try to meet their children's needs, they will always fall short at times and the child will feel hate towards them. Bettelheim believes that traditional fairy tales allow these fantasies to exist in a disguised form. A young child, still dependent, must repress the desire for revenge as it is far too threatening to contemplate any damage to the parents. As the child grows older and less dependent, the desire for revenge becomes more acute. Many fairy tales have a target for hatred which is close enough to the real parent to satisfy revenge fantasies, while being clearly *not* the parent — for example, the wicked stepmother. Children can enjoy their hate and revenge fantasies without feeling guilty or fearing retaliation from the real parents, because quite obviously the step-parent deserves everything that comes to them. Bettelheim says 'If it is objected that thoughts of revenge are immoral and the child should not have any such thoughts, it should be stressed that the idea that one should not have certain fantasies has never stopped people from having them, but only banished them into the unconscious, where the resulting havoc to the mental life is much greater. Thus the fairy story permits the child to have the best of both worlds: he can fully engage in and enjoy revenge fantasies about the step-parent of the story, without any guilt or fear in respect to the true parent.'

By understanding hate we get a better understanding of the phenomenon of revenge. Bad experiences are internalised as 'bad objects' and many people spend the rest of their lives forcing the internalised 'bad object' to love them by attacking it — it never does love them, but continues to reject, ignore or attack internally. This makes it a lot harder for some people to acknowledge any hurt or injury that occurs later on. Each subsequent hurt is a reminder of the original hurt that could not be borne. If someone is insecure and struggling with a deep and profound injury to their sense of self, they will confuse later injuries with the original trauma. These later injuries will tap into their existing hatred and wish for revenge. The hurt *must not* be felt, as then (it is believed) the person will be destroyed. Although this feels true to an infant, it is not true to an adult, but because the experience has been internalised, adults will react as if it were still the case. Much easier to react with hate than to feel the pain of injury. For some people their very lives become an act of revenge.

Philip, a young man of 25, came into therapy complaining of depression. He hated himself, was unemployed, had never had a girlfriend, and relied on his family for all his financial needs. He saw himself as ugly and overweight and often spoke with his hands covering his face. He had no idea that he could be attractive or that his gentle way of speaking was witty and amusing. Despite a talent for music he had gone to university to read English, and (as had been predicted by his family), he dropped out after one year. A relative

left him some property in his will, so now he was able to move out from home and live apart from his mother and younger brother. It was at this point he had found himself considering suicide. After telling this to his mother she in desperation offered to pay for therapy for him.

Both Philip's parents were highly successful academics. The father was a philosopher; his father before him had also been a philosopher of some renown. His mother was a literary critic. Philip had been told that they had only married because his mother was pregnant with him. Despite the birth of a younger brother, the marriage failed and the father left suddenly when Philip was 9 years old. Philip started to have dreams of air-raids and bombed-out buildings. He remembered being terribly jealous when his father would invite his younger brother to visit him and his new family — Philip was not invited as often. At home, Philip was seen as a disappointment or a problem when he did not succeed academically. His mother took to talking to the relatives about him to ask for advice.

As therapy progressed, Philip was able to access his feelings of rage and anger more easily. However, there remained a sense of ambivalence which grew stronger with each session. The therapist believed this was due to the fact that the mother was paying for the sessions. In supervision, it was suggested that the theme of revenge be explored more closely. Of course therapy would also be a means of exacting revenge on the mother — particularly as she was paying. The therapist told Philip that it was unlikely that therapy would work for him in the long run, as long as his mother was paying for it. While at first Philip was shocked by this, he gradually realised how he was living his life to be revenged. He started to play about with the idea, to find new forms of retribution. Why not increase therapy to twice a week? That way he could extract more money from his mother and she would be even more disappointed when he failed. After the initial fun of playing with these ideas, Philip slowly realised that his revenge was backfiring on his own life and taking its toll. His parents valued status — he was unemployed. His parents valued learning and he had left university. His parents only married to save themselves from ignominy — he brought ignominy down on them whenever he went to see them. Meanwhile, he was unhappy, found it impossible to make relationships with women, and had no money.

Some weeks later, Philip reached an important decision. He decided to leave therapy and to tell his mother he did not need it any more. He would find another counsellor who offered counselling to those who were unemployed without telling his mother. He had entered a music competition and received encouraging feedback and he had started a relationship with a woman. Of course his parents were not to know about this. He said he felt calmer and happier than he had for a long time. He still could not forgive his parents, but he would continue to look at this in counselling and try to exact revenge in ways that were less damaging personally.

If the revenge cycle hinges on the feeling of hate and if hate is 'love made angry', then the first step out of the revenge cycle is to bring that feeling of hate into awareness and to highlight it.

- How else can you get your revenge?
- What would be the worst thing you could do?
- Has this person suffered enough?
- What more could you do?
- How does it feel to be revenged?
- Are you satisfied yet?

By raising our awareness of the feelings of hate that lie behind revenge, there may be a window through to our hurt. Perhaps, in a relationship of trust, it might just be safe enough to start to feel the pain. Only then might it be possible to transform hate into hurt and revenge into reparation.

Tell me, how do *you* take revenge?

Further Reading

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Penguin, 1975

Robert A. Hall, 'A Schema of the Gestalt (Concept of the Organismic Flow and its Disturbance' in *The Growing Edge of Gestalt Therapy*, Edward W.L. Smith (ed), Citadel Press, 1976

Harry Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena. Object Relations and the Self*, Hogarth Press, 1968

Revenge and the Group Facilitator

Bennet Fuchs

Being a group facilitator can be a tricky business. There is much to be aware of and many difficult situations can arise. One aspect of facilitation which I have not read about in the many books on the subject, nor was taught about in my early training, is the unconscious revenge of the facilitator. I use the term unconscious revenge because I believe that most of us do not act on feelings of revenge once we are conscious that they exist. There is much talk about the use and abuse of power by therapists, and unconsciously taking revenge in a group is one aspect of this that I have become aware of through personal experience.

One of the difficult aspects of group work is that a leader or facilitator can more or less expect to be the subject of projections and of attacks. In fact, I now believe it is part of the job and indeed a healthy development in the evolution of a group, when participants feel safe enough to attack the leader, possibly bringing out their own leadership potential in the process. Of course, being human and having

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