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Who Seeks Revenge, How, and Why? Dispositional Motives and Situational Goals Underlying Revenge Decisions in Close Relationships

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Abstract

Perceived slights in close relationships can evoke a range of revenge responses. However, less is known about the motivational processes underlying such revenge decisions. Across two vignette studies, we examined how dispositional motives, namely narcissistic need for power (NNP) and victim justice sensitivity (JSV), as well as situational revenge goals shape revenge preferences. In Study 1 (N = 375), individuals higher in NNP and JSV were generally more likely to endorse revenge, with the two dispositions showing distinct associations with specific revenge decisions. Study 2 (N = 550) extended these findings by additionally examining six situational revenge goals. Both dispositions were associated with meaningful variation in revenge goals, which were in turn differentially related to revenge preferences. Specifically, goals of justice restoration and dominance assertion were consistently associated with stronger revenge desires. Together, these findings suggest that revenge following interpersonal offenses may serve different psychological functions: Individuals may seek revenge to restore threatened power and status or to address perceived injustice. Thus, the same offense may be experienced as either a threat to social standing or a violation of fairness, with dispositional characteristics shaping which motivational pathway becomes more salient.

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Intimate relationships provide emotional comfort and safety. However, if a close friend or romantic partner violates this safe space without expressing any remorse, such an offense can severely impact one's self-image, emotional well-being, and the social norms governing these relationships (Jones et al., 1997). In response, some individuals may have an impulse to retaliate themselves (Jackson et al., 2019). Such revenge can take many forms, ranging from subtle passive-aggressive behaviors to overt acts of retaliation that may mirror or exceed the severity of the original offense (Tripp et al., 2002). Yet, a desire for revenge does not necessarily lead to action (Crombag et al., 2003). Instead, some individuals may choose to avoid the offender or forgive them (McCullough et al., 1998), while others may still wish to see the offender punished, for example through third-party intervention or fate (Tripp et al., 2007).

But what underlying factors drive individuals to choose one path of revenge over another? This research explores how dispositional motives and situational goals shape revenge-related decisions in close relationships. Specifically, we investigate the desire for personal revenge, the preferred severity of revenge, the preference for external punishment, and the decision to forgo revenge altogether.

By examining how these different responses to interpersonal offenses are associated with dispositional motives and situational goals, the present studies contribute to a better understanding

of who is likely to engage in specific forms of revenge and why. Identifying the psychological functions underlying these responses may help identify factors that contribute to escalating or de-escalating interpersonal conflicts and inform approaches that promote more constructive ways of coping with offenses.

To understand why individuals respond differently to interpersonal offenses, it is necessary to consider both who is likely to seek particular forms of revenge and why they do so. We therefore first examine stable dispositional motives that may predispose individuals toward different revenge decisions. We then turn to situational goals as a more proximal account of the underlying motivation that may shape individuals' revenge-related responses.

The "Who" of Revenge: Dispositional Motives

Individuals differ considerably in both their propensity to seek revenge and the forms of revenge they prefer. One important source of these differences lies in stable motivational dispositions. From a motivational psychology perspective (McClelland, 1988), behavior is driven by underlying dispositional motives and needs that often operate unconsciously and shape the basic principles guiding an individual's behavior across situations (Lerner, 1977; Montada, 1998). Accordingly, these motives are also likely to affect how individuals perceive and respond to offenses in close relationships.

One broad category comprises motives of self-interest (Lerner, 1977; Montada, 1998). Although self-interest itself is often considered a fundamental driver of behavior, it is too broad to explain or predict specific behavioral patterns. Instead, self-serving motivation encompasses distinct motives, including the pursuit of success, autonomy, monetary rewards, and power (Lerner, 1977; Montada, 1998; Urbina & Ruiz-Villaverde, 2019). Among these, power-related motives appear particularly relevant for revenge: Individuals with a strong need for power or social dominance tend to adopt more competitive and less accommodating conflict strategies (Chun & Choi, 2014; Schneer & Chanin, 1987), are more likely to seek revenge to restore power or assert superiority (McKee & Feather, 2008), and show lower levels of forgiveness (Strelan et al., 2011).

In addition to motives of self-interest, justice motives constitute a second broad category (Lerner, 1977; Montada, 1998). These reflect a commitment to justice as a moral principle and the need to believe that people generally receive what they deserve. Justice motives can be distinguished into concerns for justice for others and justice for oneself. Whereas the former involves evaluating others' claims according to internalized moral standards, the latter focuses on protecting one's own legitimate claims while adhering to moral principles of fairness (Lerner, 1977; Montada, 1998). When individuals are personally affected by injustice, concerns about justice for oneself may become particularly salient. Individuals with strong dispositional justice motives are more likely to interpret events through a justice lens and react strongly to perceived injustices (Montada & Maes, 2016). Consistent with this view, stronger just-world beliefs have been associated with greater revenge motivation following the 9/11 attacks (Kaiser et al., 2004).

Operationalizing Motives Through Personality Traits

These previous findings indicate that dispositional motives related to power and justice are central to revenge responses. However, broad motivational constructs often have limited predictive value for specific experiences and behaviors because the psychological processes linking motives to behavior remain unclear (Murayama & Jach, 2025; Schmitt et al., 2009). Moreover, there is

limited consensus regarding their conceptualization and measurement. To address these issues, this research follows a more nuanced approach by focusing on two specific personality dispositions closely linked to these motives: narcissistic need for power and victim justice sensitivity.

Narcissistic Need for Power. The narcissistic need for power (NNP), a specific dimension of the multidimensional construct of narcissism, reflects a strong desire for social authority, dominance, and control over others (D'Souza et al., 2019; Haumann et al., 2009; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Narcissistic characteristics have been associated with aggressive and vengeful responses (Brown, 2004; Rasmussen, 2016), with need for power representing an important pathway linking narcissism to antisocial behavior (Alexander et al., 2021). Individuals high in NNP are particularly concerned with maintaining a superior position in social relationships and may therefore be especially sensitive to experiences that threaten their status or challenge their sense of entitlement (Exline et al., 2004; Rasmussen, 2016). Accordingly, they may be more likely to respond to interpersonal offenses with retaliation. Given the heightened tendency of individuals high in narcissism to react aggressively to perceived injustice (Burton & Hoobler, 2011), NNP may also be associated with disproportionate revenge that exceeds the severity of the original offense. In contrast, externally administered punishment by a third party or fate may be less strongly related to NNP. As this form of revenge does not require the individual to directly assert dominance or exercise control over the offender, it is less congruent with the enduring power-oriented motives that characterize individuals high in NNP.

Victim Justice Sensitivity. Justice sensitivity from the victim's perspective (JSV) refers to the stable tendency to perceive injustices against oneself more readily and more sensitively (Schmitt et al., 1995). Importantly, JSV is not merely an expression of self-interest or personal gain. Rather, it reflects a chronic concern with being treated fairly and with protecting oneself from exploitation and injustice, grounded in justice-related moral standards (Gollwitzer et al., 2005). Consistent with this dispositional orientation, individuals high in JSV are more likely to interpret others' behavior as intentionally unfair or hostile (Bondü, 2018), fostering a defensive interpersonal orientation that has been linked to revenge and other antisocial responses (Gerlach et al., 2012; Gollwitzer et al., 2005; Schmitt et al., 2005). Thus, individuals high in JSV may be particularly prone to retaliate against interpersonal offenses. Regarding the severity of revenge, two competing assumptions can be derived. On the one hand, a strong concern for justice may promote proportionate retaliation because it is sufficient to sanction unfair treatment. On the other hand, the heightened distrust and tendency toward hostile interpretations associated with JSV may foster excessive retaliation that exceeds the original offense (Gollwitzer et al., 2005; Maes, 1994). Unlike NNP, JSV is not characterized by a need to personally dominate or control the offender. Consequently, it may be associated with both personally and externally administered forms of revenge.

Taken together, these findings suggest that stable motivational dispositions may help explain who is likely to seek revenge and which forms of revenge individuals prefer. However, personality alone provides only a distal explanation of these differences. To understand how dispositional motives may translate into specific revenge responses, it is necessary to consider the situational goals that become relevant following an offense.

The "Why" of Revenge: Situational Goals

Revenge is rarely an end in itself. Rather, individuals may pursue revenge because they expect it to fulfill specific psychological functions in a given situation. These situational goals represent the immediate reasons underlying revenge decisions and may therefore provide a more proximal

account of why individuals choose particular responses to interpersonal offenses (Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997; Yoshimura, 2007). Broadly, revenge goals can be grouped into goals aimed at addressing the consequences of the offense for oneself (e.g., restoring self-worth or emotional balance) and goals aimed at communicating a message to the offender or others (e.g., reasserting power or deterring future harm; Boon & Yoshimura, 2020).

Although revenge has often been conceptualized as a means of deterring future transgressions (McCullough et al., 2013), empirical research suggests that people most commonly seek revenge to reestablish power or status, restore justice and fairness, correct the offender's behavior, and balance the harm caused by the offense (Boon et al., 2009; Crombag et al., 2003; Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997; Yoshimura, 2007). Goals such as restoring self-worth or preventing future harm are reported less frequently (Boon et al., 2009; Crombag et al., 2003). While such goals may encourage revenge, other objectives may instead promote refraining from retaliation. In particular, restorative goals focus on helping offenders learn from their wrongdoing and improve themselves (Fousiani & van Prooijen, 2022), whereas relationship-oriented goals emphasize maintaining or repairing the relationship with the offender (Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997; Yoshimura, 2007).

Across prior work (McKee & Feather, 2008; Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997; Strelan et al., 2011; Yoshimura, 2007), different situational goals have been linked to distinct patterns of revenge responses. Specifically, power- and status-related goals are associated with more assertive and aggressive forms of retaliation, whereas justice-related goals are compatible with both personal retaliation and externally administered punishment, as the primary aim is to sanction wrongdoing rather than personally dominate the offender. In contrast, relationship-oriented or rehabilitative goals are associated with reduced retaliation, conciliatory responses, and forgiveness. Thus, the functions revenge is intended to serve may shape not only whether individuals retaliate but also which form of revenge they prefer.

Situational goals do not arise independently from individual characteristics. Rather, stable dispositional motives may influence which goals become particularly salient following an interpersonal offense. Individuals high in NNP may be especially likely to pursue revenge when it serves goals related to restoring status, power, or control, whereas individuals high in JSV may be more strongly motivated by goals related to restoring justice and preventing further harm. Importantly, justice-related motives do not necessarily imply a lack of awareness that retaliation may violate moral standards. Rather, individuals may recognize the moral ambiguity of revenge while simultaneously perceiving retaliatory behavior as a legitimate response to wrongdoing (Gerlach et al., 2012; Gollwitzer et al., 2005).

Accordingly, situational goals may provide a more proximal explanation for why individuals differ in their revenge decisions and may help clarify how stable personality dispositions translate into specific forms of revenge.

Derivation of Research Questions

Based on these theoretical considerations, the present research addresses two related questions. First, we examined whether NNP and JSV are associated with different revenge decisions, including the desire for personal revenge, the severity of revenge, and the desire for external revenge (Study 1). Second, we investigated whether these personality dispositions predict distinct situational revenge goals and whether these goals help explain preferences for different forms of revenge (Study 2).

These studies address two important gaps in the revenge literature. First, revenge has often been

studied as a general tendency, but less is known about differentiated revenge decisions, including whether, to what extent, and in which form individuals seek revenge. Second, the motivational processes underlying revenge decisions remain insufficiently understood. In particular, dispositional motives and situational goals have rarely been examined together to explain why individuals differ in their responses to interpersonal offenses.

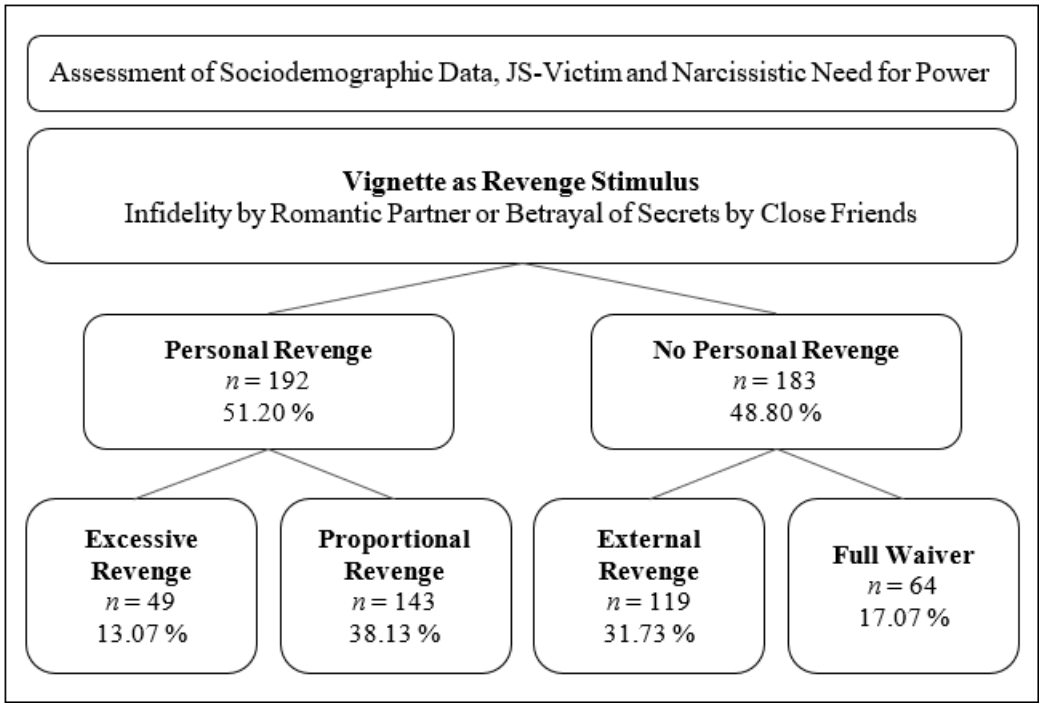
Study 1

Method

Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire assessing sociodemographic characteristics and personality traits before being assigned to one of two betrayal vignettes. After imagining themselves in the described situation, they indicated whether they wanted to seek revenge, the desired severity of such revenge, and whether they preferred external punishment by a third party or fate (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Vignette Design with Decision Tree Structure (N = 375)



Vignettes. The vignettes were designed to evoke revenge tendencies by depicting a severe breach of trust committed by close others who showed little remorse. Participants currently in a romantic relationship read a vignette describing partner infidelity (infidelity condition; n = 234), whereas participants not in a romantic relationship or reporting "it's complicated" read a vignette describing the public disclosure of a personal secret by close friends (betrayal of secrets condition; n = 141). This matching procedure was used to facilitate participants' identification with the

scenarios. A pre-study (N = 85) confirmed that both vignettes elicited comparable levels of perceived unfairness and scenario engagement (all ps > .10). The full vignette texts can be found in the appendix.

Sample

Participants were recruited through email lists, social media, and peer recruitment. After excluding participants who indicated that they could not imagine themselves in the scenario, the final sample consisted of 375 German participants (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics).

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Studies 1 and 2

Characteristic		Study 1 (N = 375)	Study 2 (N = 550)
Age	M (SD)	26.11 (8.10)	43.88 (14.19)
	Range	16–71	18–70
Gender	Female	68.3 %	48.9 %
	Male	31.7 %	51.1 %
Education	High	88.5 %	43.6 %
	Middle	11.2 %	26.9 %
	Low	0.3 %	29.5 %
Relationship Status	Relationship	57.1 %	66.7 %
	No Relationship	37.6 %	31.3 %
	It's Complicated	5.3 %	2.0 %

Measured Variables

Personality traits were assessed using 6-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*absolutely not true*) to 6 (*absolutely true*). Revenge decisions were assessed using dichotomous response options. All items are provided in the appendix.

Narcissistic Need for Power. Five items from the German Scale Inventory on Narcissism (SIN; Haumann et al., 2009) assessed NNP (α = .87). This multidimensional scale has proven to be reliable and valid in German samples, and could be differentiated from measures of self-esteem, self-love, and narcissism measured by NPI (Haumann et al., 2009).

Victim Justice Sensitivity. Five items from the German version of the Justice Sensitivity Inventory (JSI; Schmitt et al., 1997, 2005) assessed JSV (α = .76).

Revenge Decisions. Following the vignette presentation, participants indicated whether they would personally seek revenge (yes/no). Participants who chose personal revenge subsequently indicated whether they preferred proportional or excessive revenge. Those who rejected personal revenge indicated whether they preferred external punishment through a third party or fate, or letting the matter rest entirely. All items are provided in Figure A-1 in the appendix.

Data Analysis

To examine whether JSV and NNP differ between revenge decision groups, six independent-samples t-tests are conducted. To account for multiple comparisons and reduce the risk of Type I error, a Bonferroni-adjusted significance threshold is applied (α_{adj} = .05 / 6 = .008). Exploratory analyses examine potential effects of vignette condition and gender on the decision to seek

personal revenge, as well as gender differences in personality traits.

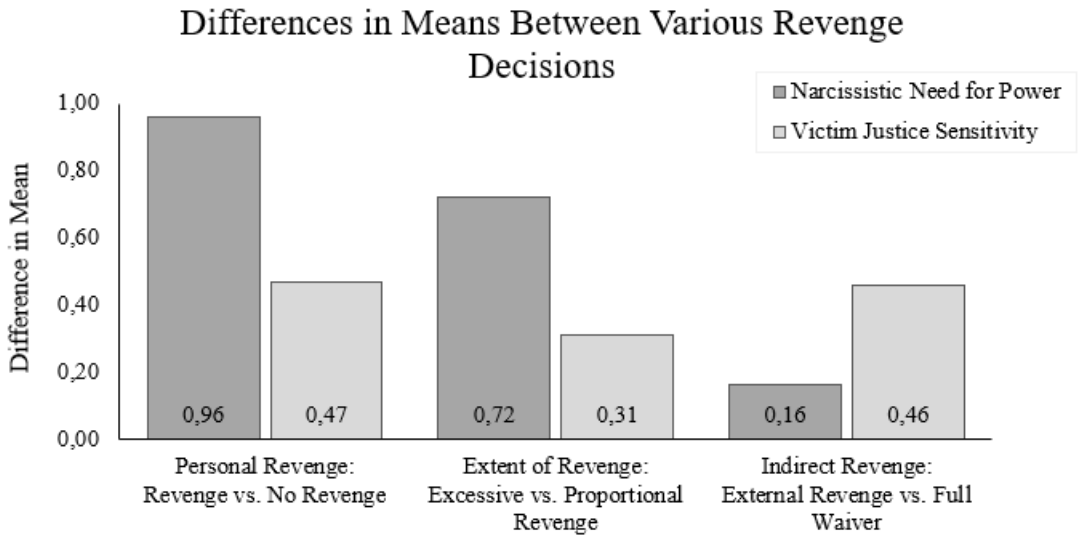
Results

Overall, scores for NNP are below the scale midpoint of 3.5 ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.23$), while JSV scores are above the midpoint ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.83$). NNP and JSV are moderately positively correlated, $r = .30$, $p < .001$. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of participants' revenge decisions.

Group Comparisons

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare revenge decision groups on NNP and JSV (see Figure 2). Full statistics for all pairwise comparisons are provided in the appendix.

Figure 2 Differences in Personality for Each Revenge Decision with According Effect Sizes



Note. ** $p < .001$, † $p = .013$, n.s. = non-significant difference

Participants who chose personal revenge scored higher on both NNP, $t(373) = 8.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$, and JSV, $t(373) = 5.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.59$, compared to those who did not choose personal revenge. Among participants choosing personal revenge, those preferring excessive over proportional revenge showed higher NNP, $t(190) = 3.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.63$. JSV was descriptively higher in the excessive revenge group but did not remain significant after Bonferroni correction, $t(190) = 2.51$, $p = .013$, $d = 0.42$. Finally, participants choosing external revenge rather than fully waiving revenge did not differ in NNP, $t(181) = 0.98$, $p = .330$, but showed higher JSV levels, $t(181) = 3.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$.

Exploratory Analyses

The proportion of participants choosing personal revenge did not differ between conditions, $\chi^2(1, N = 375) = 2.35$, $p = .13$. Overall, men were slightly more likely than women to choose

personal revenge, $\chi^2(1, N = 375) = 4.06$, $p = .04$, $\varphi = .10$. When examined separately by condition, this difference was only significant in the infidelity condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 234) = 3.71$, $p = .05$, $\varphi = .13$. Men also scored higher on NNP than women, $t(373) = -5.73$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.64$, whereas JSV did not differ by gender, $t(373) = 0.60$, $p = .55$.

Study 2

Method

Procedure

Study 2 used the same vignette-based procedure as Study 1. Participants first completed measures of personality traits before reading one of the two betrayal vignettes. After imagining themselves in the situation, they indicated their revenge decisions and revenge goals.

Sample

Participants were recruited through a German quota-based online panel to obtain a more diverse sample than in Study 1. The panel used quotas for age, gender, and education to approximate the demographic distribution of the German population. The final sample consisted of 550 German participants (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics).

Measured Variables

All measures were assessed using 6-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*absolutely not true*) to 6 (*absolutely true*).

Dispositional motives. NNP ($\alpha = .86$) and JSV ($\alpha = .84$) were assessed using the same measures as in Study 1.

Situational revenge goals. Situational goals were assessed with the newly developed Revenge Goals Scale, initially comprising 30 items adapted from existing measures, including the Conflict Goals Scale (Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997; Yoshimura, 2007) and punishment goals scales (Fousiani & van Prooijen, 2022; Twardawski et al., 2020). Thus, the item pool integrated research on interpersonal conflict and revenge goals with related work on punishment goals. Exploratory factor analyses resulted in a six-factor solution based on 28 items: justice restoration (three items; $\alpha = .87$), interpersonal restoration (three items; $\alpha = .84$), dominance assertion (four items; $\alpha = .86$), identity restoration (five items; $\alpha = .90$), prevention (five items; $\alpha = .84$), and reconciliation (eight items; $\alpha = .93$). Two items were excluded due to insufficient factor loadings. Further details on the factor analyses and item wording are provided in the appendix.

Revenge decisions. Revenge decisions were assessed with five self-developed single items based on the decision tree used in Study 1. These items assessed (1) desire to avenge oneself ("I want to take revenge on these people"; $M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.50$), (2) desire for excessive revenge ("I think these people deserve an extremely harsh punishment"; $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.48$), (3) desire for proportional punishment ("I think these people deserve a punishment that matches what they did to me"; $M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.47$), (4) desire for external punishment ("I would like these people to be punished by other people or by fate"; $M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.60$), and (5) full waiver of revenge ("I want to let the matter rest and refrain from any form of punishment"; $M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.55$).

Vignette immersion. Because individual differences in immersion may influence responses to hypothetical scenarios, perceived ability to imagine oneself in the scenario was included as a covariate ("I could easily imagine myself in the described situation"; $M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.30$).

Data Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted separately for each revenge goal and revenge decision. In Step 1, age, gender, education, vignette condition, and vignette immersion were entered as covariates. In Step 2, NNP and JSV (or, for the prediction of revenge decisions, the six revenge goals) were entered simultaneously. Consistent with the preregistration, no formal correction for multiple testing was applied; instead, emphasis was placed on the consistency of findings across conceptually related outcomes.

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are reported in the appendix.

Prediction of Revenge Goals

Overall, adding NNP and JSV in Step 2 of the hierarchical regression analyses predicting the six revenge goals significantly improved explained variance (ΔR^2). The largest increase was observed for dominance assertion, $\Delta R^2 = .25$, $p < .001$.

NNP primarily predicted goals of dominance assertion, $\beta = .45$, followed by identity restoration, $\beta = .24$, and reconciliation, $\beta = .20$, whereas JSV showed similarly high prediction effects for justice restoration, $\beta = .33$, prevention, $\beta = .31$, and identity restoration, $\beta = .27$.

Table 2 Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Revenge Goals on Personality Traits

Outcomes	R^2_{adj}	ΔR^2	β_{NNP}	β_{JSV}
Justice Restoration	.18	.13	.12**	.33***
Interpersonal Restoration	.08	.05	.08	.20***
Dominance Assertion	.30	.25	.45***	.17***
Identity Restoration	.19	.15	.24***	.27***
Prevention	.23	.12	.11***	.31***
Reconciliation	.09	.04	.20***	-.08

Note. Step 1 included age, gender, education, vignette condition, and immersion. Step 2 added the two personality traits. Standardized coefficients (β) from the final model are reported for the two personality traits narcissistic need for power (NNP) and victim justice sensitivity (JSV). All R^2_{adj} and ΔR^2 values are significant at $p < .001$. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$

Prediction of Revenge Decisions

Adding situational revenge goals in Step 2 substantially improved the prediction of all revenge decisions (all $\Delta R^2 > .33$, all $p < .001$; see Table 3), with the highest improvement for excessive revenge, $\Delta R^2 = .45$. Desire for revenge, excessive revenge, proportional revenge, and external revenge were primarily associated with justice restoration ($.25 \leq \beta \leq .31$) and dominance assertion

goals ($.35 \leq \beta \leq .41$), whereas prevention showed smaller positive associations ($.10 \leq \beta \leq .20$). In contrast, reconciliation was negatively associated with retaliatory responses ($.18 \leq |\beta| \leq .24$) and positively associated with full waiver of revenge ($\beta = .34$). Full waiver was additionally predicted by lower levels of justice restoration, dominance assertion, and prevention goals ($.18 \leq |\beta| \leq .29$), and by higher identity restoration goals ($\beta = .16$).

Table 3 Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Revenge Decisions on Revenge Goals

Outcomes	R^2_{adj}	ΔR^2	β_{JR}	β_{IPR}	β_{DA}	β_{IDR}	β_{PRE}	β_{REC}
Revenge	.44	.40	.31***	-.03	.38***	-.03	.11*	-.20***
Excessive Revenge	.52	.45	.25***	-.02	.41***	-.01	.20***	-.18***
Proportional Revenge	.44	.39	.31***	.02	.36***	-.01	.12*	-.18***
External Revenge	.40	.34	.25***	.10*	.35***	-.07	.10*	-.24***
Full Waiver	.34	.33	-.29***	-.03	-.18***	.16***	-.29***	.34***

Note. Step 1 included age, gender, education, vignette condition, and immersion. Step 2 added the six revenge goals. Standardized coefficients (β) from the final model are reported for the six revenge goals justice restoration (JR), interpersonal restoration (IPR), dominance assertion (DA), identity restoration (IDR), prevention (PRE), and reconciliation (REC). All R^2_{adj} and ΔR^2 values are significant at $p < .001$. *** $p < .001$; * $.01 < p < .05$

Discussion

Addressing how dispositional motives and situational goals shape revenge in close relationships, the present studies identified power- and justice-related motivations as key motivational drivers of revenge. At the dispositional level, both NNP and JSV were associated with stronger revenge preferences, with NNP showing stronger associations with excessive revenge and JSV with external punishment. At the situational level, justice restoration and dominance assertion consistently promoted revenge, whereas reconciliation reduced it, with further goals showing distinct associations with specific revenge decisions. Finally, the two dispositional motives were differentially related to situational goals, suggesting that their effects on revenge operate through partly distinct motivational pathways.

Power-Related Motivations for Revenge

Power-related motivations were consistently associated with revenge across both studies. In Study 1, NNP was associated with choosing personal revenge and, in particular, with preferring excessive rather than proportional retaliation. Study 2 further suggested that these associations may be understood in motivational terms: NNP showed its strongest association with dominance assertion, which in turn was consistently related to retaliatory responses. NNP was also positively related, albeit more weakly, to identity restoration. Consistent with previous research linking narcissism and power motives to revenge (Alexander et al., 2021; McKee & Feather, 2008; Rasmussen, 2016), these findings suggest that power-related functions represent an important motivational basis of revenge among individuals high in NNP.

Such individuals may therefore not seek revenge solely to punish the offender. Given their strong desire for social authority, dominance, and control (e.g., D'Souza et al., 2019), betrayals in intimate relationships may be particularly threatening for them because such offenses may

challenge their desired position of influence and superiority within the relationship as well as their social identity and self-image. Revenge may therefore simultaneously serve dominance-related and identity-restorative functions by communicating that violations of one's status or authority will not be tolerated while reaffirming one's interpersonal standing, reputation, and sense of self (Boon & Yoshimura, 2020). This motivational mechanism may be particularly pronounced following public offenses, when social status needs to be defended not only against the offender but also in the eyes of third parties (Ferriday et al., 2011).

Notably, power-related goals were not only associated with whether individuals sought revenge but also with how far they were willing to go. Dominance assertion showed the strongest association with excessive revenge among the situational goals examined, and NNP was specifically associated with excessive rather than proportional revenge in Study 1. When retaliation serves the goal of demonstrating dominance rather than merely correcting wrongdoing, more severe responses may appear more functional because they provide a stronger signal of power and superiority (McKee & Feather, 2008) and may appear justified from the individual's perspective (Stillwell et al., 2008). Thus, excessive revenge may reflect not only heightened punishment motives but an attempt to reestablish a favorable power position within the relationship.

Justice-Related Motivations for Revenge

Justice-related motivations also emerged as an important basis of revenge. In Study 1, individuals high in JSV showed stronger revenge preferences, with a particular tendency to prefer external punishment over completely waiving revenge. Study 2 complemented this pattern by showing that individuals high in JSV primarily endorsed revenge goals of justice restoration and prevention. In line with previous research (Gerlach et al., 2012; Gollwitzer et al., 2005), these findings indicate that revenge among individuals high in JSV is primarily driven by concerns with restoring fairness and protecting oneself from future victimization.

Unlike individuals high in NNP, individuals high in JSV may seek revenge less to restore interpersonal status than to reestablish a sense of fairness following an offense. Revenge may therefore represent a means of sanctioning wrongdoing and reaffirming the belief that unjust behavior will have consequences. The suffering of the offender may serve to restore balance and maintain the perception of a just world (Lerner, 1977). Consequently, even if they acknowledge the moral wrongness of their vengeful actions, individuals high in JSV may still justify them as a means of pursuing justice (Gerlach et al., 2012; Gollwitzer et al., 2005).

The preference for external punishment over completely forgoing revenge among individuals high in JSV suggests that justice concerns are not necessarily tied to personally carrying out revenge. Rather, punishment itself appears to be central, regardless of who administers it. When personal retaliation is perceived as morally problematic or practically difficult (Schumann & Ross, 2010), externally administered punishment may represent an alternative means of restoring justice, reflecting an inherent concern for justice of individuals high in JSV (Gollwitzer et al., 2005).

At first glance, the slight tendency toward excessive revenge observed in Study 1 appears difficult to reconcile with a primary concern for restoring justice, which might be expected to favor proportionate retaliation. However, the simultaneous association of JSV with prevention goals may help explain this pattern. In Study 2, prevention was particularly associated with excessive revenge, suggesting that some individuals may view more severe retaliation as necessary to prevent future harm. Individuals high in JSV are more likely to perceive interpersonal events as

unfair and threatening and may interpret ambiguous situations more suspiciously (Bondü, 2018; Schmitt et al., 2005). Consequently, they may perceive disproportionate retaliation as a justified protective response that communicates the seriousness of the violation and reduces the likelihood of future exploitation. Thus, excessive revenge among individuals high in JSV may reflect not only a desire to balance experienced injustice but also an attempt to regain security in the face of anticipated future threats (Maes, 1994).

Directions for Future Research and Limitations

The present studies offer several strengths. By using a vignette design situated in the context of intimate relationships, we reduced the influence of contextual factors that might otherwise inhibit revenge, such as power asymmetries or anticipated negative consequences in workplace settings (Schumann & Ross, 2010). While previous research has examined JSV and various facets of narcissism (e.g., Gerlach et al., 2012; Rasmussen, 2016), these studies have neither focused specifically on the facet of NNP, nor simultaneously considered both the extent of revenge and the preference for external punishment. Furthermore, Study 2 extended the findings of Study 1 by examining the situational goals that may help explain differences in revenge decisions in a larger and more heterogeneous sample. By integrating dispositional characteristics with more proximal motivational processes, the present research provides a more differentiated account of why individuals differ in their responses to interpersonal offenses.

However, some limitations need to be considered. First, the vignette methodology limits ecological validity and may restrict the generalizability of the findings to real-life offenses. Although we included scenario immersion checks to address this issue, some participants reported difficulties imagining themselves in the described situations, highlighting the challenge of creating scenarios that are sufficiently provocative to elicit revenge motivations while remaining realistic and relatable. Across studies, we addressed this issue by excluding participants with low immersion in Study 1 and statistically controlling for immersion in Study 2. Nevertheless, future research should complement vignette approaches with evidence from real-life contexts, including both revenge intentions and actual retaliatory behaviors (see also Crombag et al., 2003).

Second, the cross-sectional design limits conclusions about the temporal dynamics of the motivational processes underlying revenge desires. Although we examined associations between personality dispositions, situational goals, and revenge preferences, their temporal or causal ordering remains unclear. In particular, it remains uncertain whether situational goals account for the associations between personality dispositions and revenge responses, or whether they partly reflect individuals' interpretations of their intended actions. Longitudinal and experimental research, including formal tests of motivational pathways, is therefore needed to clarify how dispositional motives become activated in specific situations and contribute to revenge-related behavior. Such research could also examine whether these motivational processes are stable over time, how they may change in response to interpersonal experiences, and whether they can be deliberately modified through interventions.

Practical Implications

The present findings suggest that revenge-related responses may be better understood by considering the motivations underlying them. Rather than reflecting a uniform reaction to interpersonal offenses, revenge may serve different psychological functions, including restoring

threatened status and dominance or addressing perceived injustice and preventing future harm. Accordingly, third parties involved in conflict resolution may benefit from identifying the specific concerns underlying revenge desires, as these may provide different starting points for reflection and dialogue.

For example, if revenge is motivated by a perceived threat to status or power, a conflict coach or mediator might invite reflection on what the individual experienced as a threat to their standing or influence and what they would need to feel that this concern has been adequately addressed. If revenge is motivated by perceived injustice, the focus might instead be on articulating what was perceived as a violation and which norms or expectations underlie this judgment. In this way, the conversation could move beyond the offense and the question of retaliation to the concern that makes retaliation seem warranted, potentially creating space for mutual understanding and de-escalation. Whether such approaches effectively reduce revenge, however, remains to be tested.

Conclusion

The present research demonstrates that revenge following interpersonal offenses serves different psychological functions. In particular, revenge may represent an attempt to restore a sense of justice following perceived wrongdoing or to reestablish threatened power, status, and control. Accordingly, interpersonal offenses can be experienced in different ways: as violations of fairness or as threats to one's position and social standing within a relationship.

The present findings further show that these motivational differences are linked to individuals' dispositional tendencies. Whereas justice-related dispositions are associated with goals centered on restoring fairness and preventing further harm, power-related dispositions are associated with goals aimed at asserting dominance and restoring status. Thus, individuals may arrive at similar revenge responses for different reasons, with the function of revenge depending partly on the motivational concerns that are activated following an offense.

Overall, revenge should not be understood solely as a desire to harm the offender, but as a response that may serve to restore different forms of psychological balance. Understanding these distinct motivational pathways provides a more nuanced account of why interpersonal offenses escalate into revenge and may help inform strategies that foster reflection, mutual understanding, and de-escalation.

Author Note

Study 1 was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (#158-2023). The study was not preregistered. Study 2 was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (#241-2026). The preregistration is available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/XSBZ8

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Appendix

Table 4 Items for Victim Justice Sensitivity (α = .76; Schmitt et al., 2005)

German	English
Es stört mich, wenn Andere etwas erhalten, das mir gehören sollte.	It bothers me when others receive something that ought to be mine.
Es ärgert mich, wenn Andere für etwas ausgezeichnet werden, das ich verdient habe.	It makes me angry when others receive a reward that I have earned.
Es ärgert mich, wenn ich schlechter behandelt werde als Andere.	It makes me angry when I am treated worse than others.
Ich kann es nicht leicht ertragen, wenn Andere einseitig von mir profitieren.	I cannot easily bear it when others profit unilaterally from me.
Es wiegt schwer auf mir, wenn ich für etwas kritisiert werde, worüber bei Anderen hinweggesehen wird.	It burdens me to be criticized for things that are overlooked with others.

Table 5 Items for Narcissistic Need for Power (α = .87; Haumann et al., 2009)

German	English
Ich mag es, über andere zu bestimmen.	I enjoy having control over others.
Ich gebe gerne Befehle.	I like to give orders.
Mir gefällt es, wenn andere nach meiner Pfeife tanzen.	I enjoy it when others act according to my wishes.
Macht unterscheidet den Hirten vom Schaf.	Power distinguishes the shepherd from the sheep.
Manchmal wünsche ich mir, dass Menschen, die ich kenne, mich als eine mächtige Person sehen würden.	Sometimes, I wish people I know would see me as a powerful individual.

Vignette Infidelity Condition

After a very stressful but successful week at work, during which you barely saw all your loved ones, you were able to convince your boss to let you leave early for the weekend. Your plan is to celebrate the achievements of the week together with your partner and so you arrange a romantic evening for the two of you on the way home. You radiate anticipation and imagine different purely beautiful scenarios of the evening. You cannot imagine what could make you even happier at this moment. To surprise your partner, you quietly enter your apartment bearing a small gift. You immediately see that your partner is not in the immediate proximity of the entrance area of the

apartment, and you decide to put on something comfortable to enjoy the evening even more. You therefore go into the bedroom, where your closet is located.

In front of the closed bedroom door, you can hear both a male and a female voice, both sounding joyfully excited. You assume that your partner is listening to an audio book to relax, which would explain why your entrance to the apartment went unnoticed. When entering the bedroom, however, you immediately see that you have caught your partner in flagrante. The two lovers notice you too, and visibly unimpressed and without any sense of guilt, your partner explains that your relationship has been a farce for a long time and that the moment is just right to make the breakup between you two official. The person who presumably from now on will take your place in bed, also expresses little sensitivity and advises you to "take it in your stride, because it's just an adventurous fling, and nothing more".

Vignette Betrayal of Secrets Condition

For some time now, you have often been remembering embarrassing, unpleasant or even criminal things you did and experienced in your youth. Now that you have matured, you are beginning to regret these acts and would like to undo them. Sometimes memories of the past are so unpleasant and distasteful that you are finding it harder and harder to fall asleep and to get a proper night's sleep. One day you decide that it is time to confide in someone and ease your conscience. To this end, on a beautiful summer's day, you arrange a meeting in a café with your two best friends. After some small talk you manage to open up to your friends and tell them about all the things that keep you awake at night. You feel very relieved, and your friends seem to be very understanding and bolster your courage and confidence by insisting that things aren't that bad. On the way home, a slight doubt niggles at your sense of relief: Was it wise to share such private information with other people? However, you reassure yourself that these people are your best friends who only have your best interests at heart. You even smile a little at how you can be so suspicious.

When you arrive home, you decide to check your e-mails and visit your social media platform. There you see that your two friends have not only compiled and published a list of all your embarrassing and dangerous secrets, but at the same time a competition is taking place in the comments section to see who can write the meanest comment. You can also see that your friends are compounding this process with their own nasty comments. When you finally reach your friends on the phone and confront them, you merely get the answer that you should not make such a fuss. After all, it is a source of great fun for everyone.

Figure 3 Revenge Decision Tree

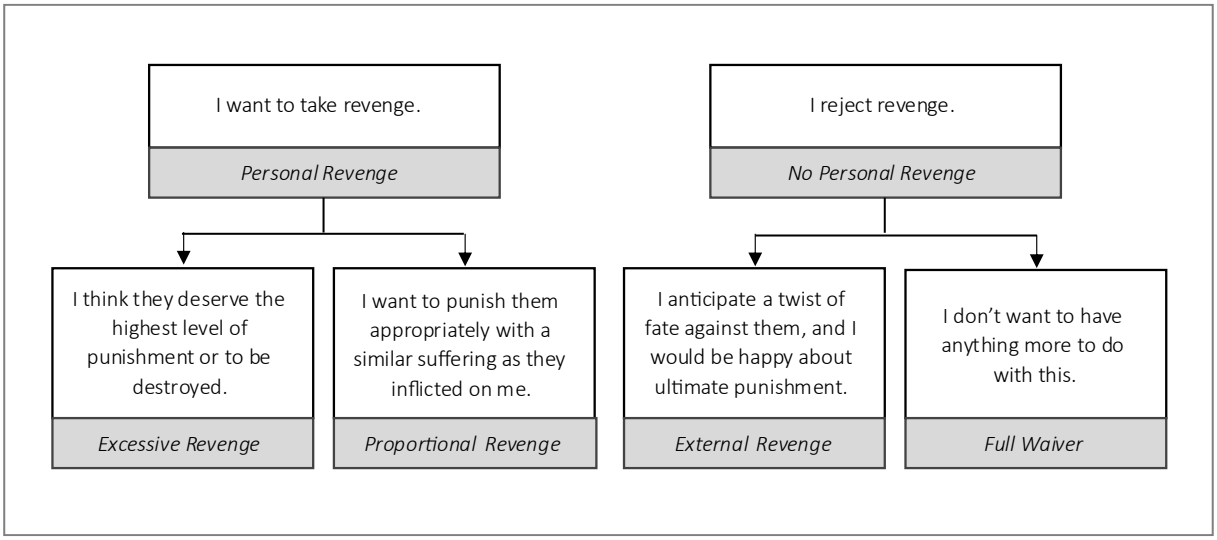


Table 6 Group Comparisons Regarding Narcissistic Need for Power

	Narcissistic Need for Power						
	n	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*d*	*Power*
Personal Revenge	192	3.43	1.19	8.14**	373	0.84	1.00
No Personal Revenge	183	2.47	1.07				
Excessive Revenge	49	3.96	1.18	3.78**	190	0.63	0.92
Proportional Revenge	143	3.24	1.15				
External Revenge	119	2.53	1.07	0.98	181	-	-
Full Waiver	64	2.37	1.06				

Note. ** $p < .001$; power was calculated post-hoc (one-tailed, α error probability = .008)

Table 7 Group Comparisons Regarding Victim Justice Sensitivity

	Victim Justice Sensitivity						
	n	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*d*	*Power*
Personal Revenge	192	4.85	0.75	5.74**	373	0.59	0.99
No Personal Revenge	183	4.38	0.84				
Excessive Revenge	49	5.08	0.65	2.51†	190	0.42	0.55
Proportional Revenge	143	4.77	0.77				
External Revenge	119	4.54	0.79	3.68**	181	0.57	0.90
Full Waiver	64	4.08	0.85				

Note. ** $p < .001$; † $p = .013$; power was calculated post-hoc (one-tailed, α error probability = .008)

Table 8 Factor Matrix of Revenge Goals

Revenge Goals		Factors					
German	English	1	2	3	4	5	6
Justice Restoration (α = .87)							
Ich möchte Gerechtigkeit wiederherstellen.	I want to restore justice.[1]	0.05	-0.03	-0.09	-0.16	0.09	**-0.71**
Ich möchte den mir zugefügten Schaden ausgleichen.	I want to compensate for the damage done to me.[1]	-0.02	0.09	-0.04	-0.06	0.06	**-0.82**
Ich möchte das mir geschehene Unrecht wiedergutmachen.	I want to rectify the wrong that was done to me.[1]	0.00	0.05	0.11	-0.05	0.02	**-0.77**
Interpersonal Restoration (α = .84)							
Ich möchte, dass diese Personen mir wieder mit Respekt und Höflichkeit begegnen.	I want these people to treat me with respect or politeness.[2]	-0.07	0.09	0.10	0.06	**0.84**	-0.03
Ich möchte, dass diese Personen mich fairer behandeln.	I want these people to treat me more fairly.[2]	-0.03	0.00	-0.01	0.04	**0.88**	-0.05
Ich möchte eine Entschuldigung von diesen Personen erhalten.	I want to get these people's apology.[2]	0.10	0.04	-0.08	-0.09	**0.61**	-0.01
Dominance Assertion (α = .86)							
Ich möchte diesen Personen auf irgendeine Weise wehtun.	I want to hurt these people in some way.[2]	0.08	-0.03	**0.71**	0.10	-0.04	-0.28
Ich möchte diese Personen schädigen.	I want to defeat these people.[2]	0.10	-0.01	**0.75**	0.10	-0.06	-0.24
Ich möchte meine Autorität oder Dominanz über diese Personen aufrechterhalten.	I want to maintain my authority or dominance over these people.[2]	0.08	0.08	**0.72**	-0.21	0.06	0.14
Ich möchte meine Überlegenheit demonstrieren.	I want to demonstrate my superiority.[1]	-0.06	0.05	**0.72**	-0.18	0.07	0.08
Ich möchte diese Personen für ihre negative Handlung bestrafen.	I want to punish these people for their negative action.[2, 5]	0.15	-0.05	0.45	0.07	-0.03	-0.46
Ich möchte die Kontrolle über die Situation zurückerlangen.	I want to regain control over the situation.[1,5]	0.01	-0.10	0.23	-0.29	0.29	-0.13
Identity Restoration (α = .90)							
Ich möchte mein soziales Ansehen wiederherstellen.	I want to restore my social face.[2]	-0.03	0.08	0.00	**-0.85**	-0.04	-0.07
Ich möchte meinen Ruf wiederherstellen.	I want to restore my reputation.[2]	-0.02	0.10	-0.03	**-0.89**	-0.04	-0.05
Ich möchte meine Ehre wiederherstellen.	I want to restore my honor.[2]	0.03	0.12	0.10	**-0.78**	-0.06	-0.03
Ich möchte mein Selbstwertgefühl wiederherstellen.	I want to restore my self-esteem.[2]	0.12	-0.18	0.00	**-0.62**	0.12	-0.02
Ich möchte meinen persönlichen Stolz wiederherstellen.	I want to restore my personal pride.[2]	0.08	-0.18	0.09	**-0.62**	0.11	-0.04
Prevention (α = .84)							
Ich möchte diesen Personen zeigen, dass solche Taten Konsequenzen haben.	I want to show these people that such actions have consequences.[3]	**0.41**	-0.20	0.25	-0.10	0.03	-0.22
Ich möchte diese Personen davon abhalten, in Zukunft erneut so zu handeln.	I want to prevent these people from behaving this way again in the future.[3]	**0.63**	0.12	0.04	-0.07	0.03	-0.09
Ich möchte anderen zeigen, dass solche Taten wie von diesen Personen Konsequenzen haben.	I want to show others that actions like those committed by these people have consequences.[3]	**0.66**	-0.07	0.20	-0.10	-0.01	-0.08

Ich möchte andere davon abhalten, in Zukunft ähnlich wie diese Personen zu handeln.	I want to prevent others from behaving similarly to these people in the future.[3]	**0.80**	0.01	0.07	-0.04	-0.02	0.00
Ich möchte, dass diese Personen verstehen, dass ihr Handeln falsch war.	I want these people to understand that their actions were wrong.[4]	**0.48**	0.15	-0.17	-0.05	0.21	-0.01
Reconciliation (α = .93)							
Ich möchte diesen Personen die Chance geben, aus ihren Fehlern zu lernen.	I want to give these people the chance to learn from their mistakes. [4]	0.37	**0.51**	-0.13	0.00	0.17	0.02
Ich möchte diesen Personen helfen, sich zu bessern.	I want to help these people better themselves.[4]	0.25	**0.70**	-0.10	-0.07	0.06	-0.03
Ich möchte mich mit diesen Personen einigen.	I want to come to terms with these people.[2]	0.08	**0.81**	-0.01	0.00	0.12	0.02
Ich möchte eine gute Beziehung zu diesen Personen erhalten.	I want to maintain a good relationship with these people.[2]	-0.02	**0.89**	0.10	-0.02	-0.02	-0.03
Ich möchte mit diesen Personen zu einem gegenseitigen Verständnis gelangen.	I want to achieve a mutual understanding with these people.[2]	0.04	**0.85**	-0.02	-0.05	0.06	-0.03
Ich möchte mit diesen Personen einen Kompromiss ausarbeiten.	I want to work out some compromise agreement with these people.[2]	-0.01	**0.86**	0.04	-0.03	0.01	-0.08
Ich möchte das Problem mit diesen Personen gemeinsam klären.	I want to jointly clarify our problem.[2]	0.08	**0.77**	-0.02	-0.02	0.14	-0.02
Ich möchte meine Beziehung zu diesen Personen beenden. (-)	I want to terminate my relationship with these people.[2]	0.22	**-0.59**	-0.05	-0.06	0.07	-0.05

Note. [1] Self-developed items; [2] items adapted from Ohbuchi & Tedeschi (1997) and Yoshimura (2007); [3] items adapted from Twardawski et al. (2020), [4] Items adapted from Fousiani & Van Prooijen (2021); [5] items were not included in further analyses due to low factorial loadings and cross-loadings

Table 9 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables

	M	*SD*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*
(1) NNP	3.98	1.03	-											
(2) JSV	2.46	1.08	.25	-										
(3) JR	3.96	1.23	.20	.37	-									
(4) IPR	4.15	1.37	.09	.23	.34	-								
(5) DA	2.90	1.30	.50	.30	.49	.12	-							
(6) IDR	4.07	1.24	.26	.34	.47	.39	.46	-						
(7) PRE	4.06	1.19	.19	.35	.57	.45	.41	.57	-					
(8) REC	2.95	1.23	.19	-.06	.15	.47	.00	.16	.24	-				
(9) REV	3.39	1.50	.29	.35	.50	.08	.57	.27	.36	-.13	-			
(10) EXC	3.31	1.48	.29	.34	.54	.14	.61	.35	.47	-0.07	.72	-		
(11) PRO	3.57	1.47	.24	.35	.54	.16	.55	.31	.41	-0.08	.69	.75	-	
(12) EXT	3.65	1.60	.27	.36	.48	.16	.51	.27	.37	-.13	.57	.62	.62	-
(13) FW	3.18	1.55	-.07	-.24	-.44	-.09	-.35	-.16	-.35	.22	-.51	-.48	-.49	-.39

Note. NNP: narcissistic need for power; JSV: victim justice sensitivity; JR: justice restoration, IPR: interpersonal restoration, DA: dominance assertion, IDR: identity restoration, PRE: prevention, REC: reconciliation, REV: revenge, EXC: excessive revenge, PRO: proportional revenge; EXT: external revenge, FW: full waiver. Correlations involving revenge decisions (Variables 9–13) are Spearman correlations; all others are Person correlations. Coefficients ≥ |.10| are significant at $p < .01$; coefficients of |.09| at $p < .05$; smaller coefficients are not significant.