

How does “unidentifiability” of others promote indiscriminate revenge?

— Focusing on group entitativity perception —

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Indiscriminate revenge that involves not only a perpetrator but also innocents is undoubtedly immoral and incorrect behavior. Although a number of research on social identity or stereotypes have uncovered why the indiscriminate revenge occurs, they have addressed the behaviors only in intergroup contexts. However, indiscriminate revenge also should occur in intragroup situations specifically in anonymous systems that are widely prevalent in human societies. In the present studies, we focused on the absence of identifiability as a key concept in the anonymous systems and investigated whether people would be more likely to and more strongly take indiscriminate revenge when they could not distinguish a perpetrator from innocents. Moreover, we investigated whether perceived entitativity would promote the indiscriminate revenge toward undistinguishable persons. We conducted three experiments, two lab-experiments (Study 1 and 2b) and an online experiment (Study 2a). Participants were asked to participate in or imagine a group of three strangers interacting with each other and one of the two other persons showed a friendly attitude and another showed a hostile one toward the participants. We manipulated the identifiability so that they could know who was hostile in the non-anonymous condition whereas they could not in the anonymous condition. The results of Study 1 revealed that participants in the anonymous condition were more likely to give fewer resources to two other persons than those in the non-anonymous condition in resource distribution task. The results indicated that indiscriminate revenge was promoted by the absence of identifiability. Moreover, the characteristic pattern of resource distribution was observed in the anonymous condition. Specifically some participants distributed the resource equally between two others and themselves. The results indicated that the participants might perceive two others as a single unit. We modified the index of indiscriminate revenge in Study 2a (the amount of reduction of two others' remuneration) and 2b (the duration time of unpleasant buzzer sounds) and tested the same hypothesis as in Study 1. Although the results of Study 1 was not replicated in Study 2a and 2b, the moderating effect of the perceived entitativity was obtained showing that the degree of the perceived entitativity promotes indiscriminate revenge only in the anonymous condition but not in the non-anonymous condition. Our research showed firstly that the absence of identifiability in anonymous systems can promote indiscriminate revenge caused by high entitativity perception.