

When harm done can never be balanced: Vicarious revenge and the death of Osama bin Laden

April 29 2014

Friday will mark the third anniversary of Osama bin Laden's assassination, a day when U.S. President Barack Obama famously stated "Justice has been done." But has it? A new study from a team of social psychology researchers led by Mario Gollwitzer of Philipps University of Marburg, has questioned whether this instance of vicarious revenge led to feelings of satisfaction and reestablished justice within the American public, including whether bin Laden's assassination ignited craving for more revenge.

Justice achieved

Vicarious revenge, where the need for justice is felt not by the victims, but by people in the same group, has been shown to feel similar to personal revenge. Gollwitzer and his team developed two studies designed to test the notion "that Americans' vengeful desires in the aftermath of 9/11 predicted a sense of justice achieved after bin Laden's death..."

The data suggest that those Americans who believed that bin Laden's assassination sent a message to the perpetrators ("Don't mess with us") were also the ones who thought that his death balanced the scales of justice.

The second important finding from the study is that bin Laden's death

did not fully quench Americans' desire for revenge. Respondents who showed a stronger sense of "justice achieved" also showed a stronger desire to take further revenge against those who were responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Although justice might be achieved, the avengers might not feel psychological closure. Reestablishing [justice](#), successfully asserting one's message, does not necessarily close the chapter in the case of [revenge](#).

The "how" matters

The third important finding presented shows that Americans were more satisfied with fact that bin Laden was killed intentionally than the possibility of bin Laden being killed accidentally (e.g., in an airplane crash). Compared to self-reported responses from Pakistanis or Germans, Americans felt much more satisfaction towards the death of bin Laden as it actually happened than towards any other circumstance of his death.

Gollwitzer and his team believe that this difference in "intent" reflects the fact that Americans were the victims of 9/11, whereas Germans, for example, merely observed these events, but were not directly involved in them.

More information: The study "Vicarious Revenge and the Death of Osama bin Laden," by Mario Gollwitzer, Linda J. Skitka, Daniel Wisneski, Arne Sjöström, Peter Liberman, Syed Javed Nazir, and Brad J. Bushman was published online and in print in the May 2014 in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, a journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP).

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