

**“V” for Vendetta: An Investigation Into Swift Blame as a Predictor for Revenge Cognitions**

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## Abstract

Humans are in constant interaction with one another, frequently needing to evaluate situations where one claims another has caused them harm. In these situations, certain levels of ambiguity are involved and we are naturally susceptible to error when determining who should be held accountable, leading to the misplacement of blame and an upset of justice. Those in positions of power oftentimes rely on quick, automatic processing to determine who is responsible and administer punishment, resulting in a decrease in morale, sense of justice and overall well-being in the workplace. This phenomenon is known as “swift blame”. This paper aims to investigate the relationship between an individual’s engagement in swift blame and the likelihood that they will respond with endorsing revenge cognitions and behaviours over forgiveness. This investigation was part of a larger research project which used an online, vignette-based questionnaire administered to participants gathered through convenience and Prolific sampling. They were asked to evaluate and make a decision related to reprimanding a hypothetical employee ( $N = 182$ ). I specifically focused on examining participants’ swift blame behaviours and the relationship of these with their tendency to engage in forgiveness of revenge behaviours. Results from this study showed that overall there were mixed findings regarding the hypothesis that swift blame tendencies predict revenge cognition. I will investigate methodological issues and discuss alternative explanations along with implications of these findings for other research and practical implications.

*Keywords:* swift blame, forgiveness, revenge, workplace, organisational psychology, automatic processing

## Introduction

Mistakes. Blunders. Slip-ups. Misunderstandings. Errors. Perhaps these words drudge up some uncomfortable emotions like fear or anger in certain individuals. By nature, mankind is susceptible to inaccuracy. “Nobody’s perfect” is a saying that is familiar to many and resonates with all. However, despite the unity that this imperfection seems to offer us, aberrations tend to result in highly negative emotional reactions, especially when they occur in workplace scenarios. Most corporations involve highly-collaborative environments, where several people must coordinate, resulting in an environment where one person’s slip-up can sometimes drastically impact the functioning of the entire organisation. Oftentimes, it is up to management to determine who is at fault and determine a seemingly appropriate punishment to administer to the wrongdoer. Unfortunately, this decision-making is not always a smooth process that leads to justice, and rather can result in more problems than those it set out to solve.

Frequently, managers often assign blame without proper thought, relying on fast cognitive processes and snap judgements, and in a hurried fashion due to influences from several psychological and external factors, which can result in the unjust allocation of blame to a party that perhaps does not merit the subsequent consequences (Skarlicki et al., 2017) This process is known as swift blame, denominated as such by Skarlicki et al. (2017). According to Bradfield & Aquino (1999), the assignment of blame is what turns any undesirable action into a grievance requiring rectification. This merits a consequent reaction from the offended party, who either takes the so-called “high road” and forgives the perpetrator, or (as happens more often than not) the insulted chooses to enact revenge and/or demand some sort of compensatory response from the offender(s) (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999).

This paper explains the components of swift blame in an organisational setting and examines its consequences for employees and the organisation's environment as a whole. Its main goal is to explore blame attribution as a potential predictor for the offended party choosing revenge over forgiveness. More specifically, I will test the hypothesis that an individual who engages in swift blame is more likely to endorse revenge cognitions over those of forgiveness.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Humans are an inherently social species (Young, 2008), and holding others accountable for their perceived wrongdoing is an evolutionary tactic we engage in to discourage wrongdoing and ensure social order (Alicke, 2000). This process is evident in most workplace environments, as Scott Adams notes in his satirical book *Dilbert's Guide to the Rest of Your Life: Dispatches from Cubicleland* (2007): "The job isn't done until you've blamed someone for the parts that went wrong." By assigning blame, managers can not only demonstrate compliance with the organisation's obligation of accountability to their bosses, but also explain and justify the administered punishment to their subordinates and even prove to themselves that the organisation, the world, and their own selves are reasonable and honourable (Skarlicki et al., 2017).

### ***Swift Blame: Definition, Components and Consequences***

Blame and subsequent discipline appear to be the most rational ways to restore justice and order in an organisation. However, in today's organisational climate, managers are oftentimes required to act as swiftly as possible to restore order, receiving pressure from organisational and legal factors, as well as being influenced by psychological components that oftentimes they are largely unaware of (Skarlicki et al., 2017). These high-pressure factors provoke a rushed and hasty administration of blame based on unthoughtful judgements,

misshapen beliefs and quick processing (Skarlicki et al., 2017). This phenomenon is known as “swift blame”.

**The Processes Underlying SB.** According to research conducted on blame in organisations, swift blame is a result of automatic processing, or system one thinking (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Skarlicki et al. (2017) define this concept as the “ideas, thoughts, feelings and response tendencies that are processed automatically...without any specific intent”. This behavioural reaction is in accordance with the principle of least effort, which is defined as “the basic behavioural hypothesis that an organism will choose a course of action that appears to require the smallest amount of effort or expenditure of energy” (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). This is a common process that is also involved in one’s tendency to jump to conclusions (JTC), a phenomenon that is also associated with snap decisions and judgements made before careful collection and examination of available information (Sánchez & Dunning, 2021). Furthermore, individuals who jump to conclusions are likely to believe that their initial sample of information (no matter how small) is completely reliable and relevant enough to make subsequent decisions, spend little time processing and reflecting upon this information, and feel an exaggerated sense of confidence about those decisions (Sánchez & Dunning, 2021). These aforementioned processes involved in JTC closely resemble operationalizations of swift blame: specifically, excessive dependence on automatic processing, lack of effort placed into information gathering and overconfidence in one’s information quality and reliability and in one’s own decision-making abilities (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Therefore, many parallels can be drawn from the two behaviours.

All of these mental shortcuts involved in swift blame compose a largely involuntary response that proved useful in our evolution due to their efficacy, swiftness and requirement of

relatively low effort (Skarlicki et al., 2017). However, this failure to take one's time and inhibit this automatic processing in favour of proper analysis and rationalisation typically leads to inaccuracies in assigning responsibility, which in turn provokes further sense of injustice and decreased job satisfaction in the workplace (Schmitt & Dörfel, 1999).

**Consequences of Uncorrected Blame.** While it is obvious that others need to be held accountable for their mistakes, it is essential that blame be assigned in a manner that is not only just and fair but perceived as such by all employees. Although the term "swift blame" is relatively new, the literature that utilises this as a construct draws from research that is far from it. When we consider that swift blame is essentially just unjust blame that goes uncorrected, we can see how the proliferation of this in an organisation can prove detrimental to its functioning, and there are numerous other articles that explain the challenges of misplaced and (more importantly) uncorrected blame.

Those who receive blame naturally experience negative emotions, especially when they believe that the claims are unfounded. This can lead to the development of a kind of "blame culture" within the organisation, wherein employees frequently engage in "rumination, aggression and retaliation" and experience an overall decrease in job satisfaction (Skarlicki et al., 2017). The organisation might experience an increase in absenteeism and turnover as the employees leave in search of a less toxic work environment, resulting in a tarnished reputation that can negatively affect the entity's overall functioning and productivity. As aforementioned, the offended party may engage in revenge that further contributes to the toxic work environment and can even result in workplace violence. Moreover, research conducted by Schmitt & Dörfel (1999) has shown that employees who perceive a lack of procedural justice, or the "idea of fairness in the processes that resolve disputes and allocate resources" (Commonwealth of

Massachusetts, n.d.), in their workplace are more likely to experience a decrease in overall psychosomatic well-being, which then later manifests itself in feelings of helplessness and distress. These feelings can translate into physical ill-health, resulting in a greater number of sick days being taken by the organisation's employees and therefore resulting in lower productivity and profits (Schmitt & Dörfel, 1999). An overreliance on punishment and blame also can demotivate subordinates to collaborate with their superiors and comply with the company's policy and norms (Mooijman & Graham, 2018). Thus, a work environment where accusations run amuck, without proper thorough consideration of evidence and compassion for one's fellow employees, has negative consequences not only at the individual level but at the organisational level as well.

### ***Swift Blame and Revenge***

Evidence suggests that people act in congruence with their need for restorative justice or the "need to 'make things right'", which involves four processes that are distinct but also co-occurring: revenge, forgiveness, restitution and compensation (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Misconduct upsets this feeling of justice, provoking the need for rectification after a party feels that they have been wronged by another, which can signify revenge behaviours. Individuals who engage in swift blame rely on automatic processing in order to reach a decision regarding who is responsible for an offence to achieve this sense of rectification, and oftentimes their final conclusion is erroneous due to lack of effortful information processing and overconfidence in the reliability of their information and accuracy of their own judgements (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Studies conducted both by Bradfield & Aquino (1999) and Aquino et al. (2001) show that this blame attribution plays an integral part in shaping the cognitions involved in an individual's decision between revenge and forgiveness: first, the offence must be determined as meriting

blame on another party, thereby turning it into a grievance; and secondly, blame attribution is positively related to revenge cognitions and behaviours. Thus, I will investigate whether an individual's reliance on swift blame increases the likelihood that they will endorse revenge cognitions over those related to forgiveness.

**Revenge.** Revenge is defined as the “basic human impulse and powerful motivator of social behaviour” used, oftentimes alongside feelings of aggression and anger, to reinstate due process. The path of revenge often entails a connection between the victim's violated expectations, need for accountability and feelings of anger that causes them to arrive at the conclusion that the wrongdoer should be held accountable for their actions after ruminating over the incident (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). This attribution of blame to the offender means that the offended believes that justifications and compensations need to be made. This results in the insulted party becoming angry and ultimately seeking revenge, which may take the form of extreme behaviours such as theft, feuding and even violence (Aquino et al., 2001).

**Swift Blame as a Predictor for Revenge Cognitions.** As aforestated, swift blame involves a quick assessment of the situation based largely on automatic processing, hastily (mis)attributing the cause of the injustice to an external party. Oftentimes, this process is accompanied by feelings of anger and aggressiveness that are also frequently found to be linked to revenge behaviours (Wang et al., 2016). Moreover, this kind of blame often involves *a posteriori* reasoning that leads to a biased revision of evidence after-the-fact. That is, those holding the offending party accountable might interpret evidence later made available in a manner that supports their initial claim, a phenomenon known as “blame-validation” (Skarlicki et al., 2017). This validation, combined with the fact that revenge cognitions involve an increase in negative thinking that acts as a psychological barrier for forgiveness cognitions, further



decrease the likelihood of the enactment of forgiveness behaviours after engaging in swift blame. Hence, engagement in swift blame strongly suggests one will endorse revenge cognitions and therefore engage in revenge behaviours.

**Forgiveness.** Forgiveness, on the other hand, requires that the offended relinquishes the need for redress and retribution, forsaking these feelings of resentment and anger in exchange for compassion, benevolence and love for the offender. This option usually requires effortful and elongated exercises in intellectual forgiveness, therefore making it incongruent with the quick and automatic processing involved in swift blame (Aquino et al., 2001). Despite requiring more cognitive effort, individuals who engage in forgiveness reap many benefits, such as a decrease in negative emotions alongside an improved psychological and physical health, the restoration of the victim's control of the situation and their relationship with the offender, and the gratification of a morally superior response (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Given the evidence gathered from these studies on the nature of swift blame, forgiveness and revenge, this paper attempts to take the notion that blame attribution is a predictor for engaging in revenge behaviours and test the hypothesis that individuals who engage in swift blame are more likely to engage in revenge cognitions than forgiveness cognitions.

### **Overview of the Study**

As aforementioned, misplaced blame can upset the harmony of a workplace and have negative impacts on the employees (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Unfortunately, this blame often goes unrevised and uncorrected due to individuals' tendency to dependent on automatic processing, poor revision of information and an overconfidence in the reliability of one's information and accuracy of one's judgements, a phenomenon Skarlicki et al. (2017) coined as "swift blame". Once this decision is made, discipline and retributions need to be applied. Frequently, these snap

decisions are accompanied by intense emotions of feelings of anger, leading individuals to be far more likely to enact revenge on rather than forgive the offender (Wang et al., 2016). This paper investigates these automatic and biased processes that underlie swift blame and examines them as possible predictors for an individual's endorsement of revenge cognitions over those of forgiveness. While research on this particular cognitive process is fairly new, understanding it further offers us opportunities to investigate how we can reduce its proliferation in the workplace, and therefore (hopefully) stimulate a more forgiving, healthy environment.

## Method

### Sample Characteristics

We collected data from a total of 264 cases with a convenience sampling method. Each member of our research team sent a link to the online questionnaire to their close contacts (family, friends and other members of their social circle). Furthermore, we decided to use our budget to acquire 80 more participants through the platform Prolific. Overall, 82 cases were eliminated based on failure to pass at least two of the three attention checks in place or discontinuation after filling out the informed consent form, given that the answers of those who fail to do so most likely were not reading each question carefully nor responding honestly, therefore diminishing the quality of the survey as a whole. This resulted in a final sample of 182 participants.

The sample used in our analysis consisted of 182 participants, of which 57.7% were female, 39% were male, and 3.3% were either gender-diverse or preferred to not say. The participants' age range was from 18 to 87 years old, with a mean of  $M = 35.75$  and a standard deviation of  $SD = 14.254$ . Of these 182 participants, 36.1% were university students, 61.7% were not, and 2.2% of the participants did not want to specify. Finally, years of workforce experience ranged from 0 years to 50, with an average of  $M = 14.968$  years and a standard deviation of  $SD = 12.905$  years. No compensation was offered to the participants for completing the questionnaire.

### Materials and Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online, accessible through a link that led participants to the platform Qualtrics. As a prerequisite for completing the questionnaire, participants were provided an information sheet and asked whether they provide their consent. The respondents did

not receive any form of debriefing after completing the questionnaire, as there was no form of deception involved in the study.

After completing several personality and individual differences assessments, participants were asked to read a case that depicted a scenario in which blame and discipline were involved. We chose to elaborate our own plausible workplace scenario that would result in a decision being made for whether or not an individual should be blamed for wrongdoing (see Appendix A). The participants were asked to imagine that they were a manager in an organisation. They were presented with information about an employee, despite poor past work performance that placed her on probation, seemed to be improving in the past weeks and seeking feedback to boost her performance. Despite these efforts, the “manager” received a complaint from a client about said employee and now measures need to be taken to rectify the error. This combination of factors, alongside a lack of information about the nature of the client’s complaint and Arianne’s current work performance after efforts to improve, created a sufficiently vague environment to examine swift blame processes. The ambiguity of the scenario was essential for the examination of swift blame, specifically the low effort typically placed into information gathering and processing, coupled with an overconfidence in the sufficiency and reliability of that information (to see the complete vignette, see Appendix A).

To examine participants’ endorsement of revenge cognitions and behaviours, items from the Wade’s Forgiveness Instrument (1989) were selected and adapted to better fit the context of the survey (Appendix B). The original scale contains 83 items, separated into nine underlying factors: some are cognitive, like revenge, freedom from obsession, affirmation and victimisation; others, like avoidance, toward God, conciliation and holding a grudge, are grouped by the behavioural factor; and positive and negative feelings belong to the factor affect. This scale was

chosen due to its reported high reliability and internal consistency: previous analyses for Cronback alpha reliabilities and internal consistency reliabilities yielded results ranging from .79 to .95 and .72 to .95, respectively (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Furthermore, upon comparison of the mean responses of subjects to the items conducted during the original studies, a reported difference was found between responses given by subjects who forgive an offender and those who do not forgive (Wade, 1989). Unfortunately, after a reliability test on this particular dataset, it was found that the scales were of extremely low reliability, which will be discussed further in the limitations section.

## **Measures**

### ***General Scenario Evaluation***

We then proceeded to assess the participants on different components of blame assignment. This way, we could get a better understanding of the participants' grasp on and interpretation of the scenario itself, and the extent to which they thought the employee was responsible for the error.

**Offence Severity.** First, participants were measured on their subjective understanding of the situation itself. We asked subjects to rate assess the severity of the offence through a bipolar three-item scale (1-7, with 1 being “insignificant”, “minor” and “not serious”, and 7 being “significant”, “major” and “serious”). The reliability was analysed using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a value of  $\alpha = 0.833$ .

**Assignment of Blame.** They were then asked to assess the extent to which they believed the offender was “responsible”, “at fault” and “to be blamed” for the error through a 7-point

Likert scale (ranging from 1, “strongly disagree” to 7, “strongly agree”). A reliability analysis revealed an acceptable value of Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha = 0.724$ ).

**Disciplinary Measures.** We then proceeded to measure how severely the participant believed that the wrongdoer should be punished, using another sliding scale ranging from 0 (“she should not be disciplined”) to 100 (“she should be dismissed”). To reiterate the subject’s evaluation of the situation, participants were reminded that the employee was on probation previous to the error in question, and were asked whether or not they, as manager, would dismiss her.

### ***Swift Blame Indicators***

In order to assess whether an individual was more or less likely to engage in swift blame, participants were asked to answer several questions regarding their cognitive appraisals of the situation itself and their own evaluation process, as well as the measures that they as “manager” would take to rectify the mistake and/or discipline the offender. The items created to assess swift blame are based on the aforementioned research of Skarlicki et al. (2017) and Sánchez & Dunning (2021), which highlight the role of automatic processing, low effort, snap decisions and overconfidence in information in swift blame tendencies. The following indicators were created in accordance with this research.

**Confidence in Available Information.** Taking from measures used in Graso (2023), participants rated, on a 7-point Likert scale, whether they felt the quantity and quality of the information they were provided was enough to make their judgements. This criterion is based on evidence taken from Sánchez & Dunning (2021), which suggests that individuals who jump to conclusions feel overconfident about having had enough information to make a sound decision.

These processes are closely tied, and individuals who engage in swift blame also frequently lack sufficient information to make a knowledgeable decision yet will fail to search for more information and believe they were provided with enough initially to have been able to adequately assign blame (Skarlicki et al., 2017).

**Information-Processing Effort.** To assess participants' overall level of information-processing, they were asked to rate (also on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) their levels of attention, concentration and thinking involved in making their decision (Cooper-Martin, 1994). In accordance with previous research, individuals who engage in swift blame rely on automatic processing and therefore should have scored quite low on these items (Skarlicki et al., 2017).

**Self-Reported Effort in Decision-Making Process.** As aforementioned, swift-blame is thought to be the result of automatic, low-effort processing (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Therefore, participants were also asked to evaluate how much effort they believed they had placed into making said decision (with 1 being “no effort at all” and 7 being “a lot of effort”).

**Time.** Research by Sánchez & Dunning (2021) suggests individuals who jump to conclusions are likely to invest little time in their information processing and decision-making efforts. Once again, this is an element that also contributes to engagement in swift blame. As the name suggests, individuals who engage in this are unlikely to carefully collect and consider available information before arriving at a conclusion (Skarlicki et al., 2017). To measure this in our participants, we asked them to specify how many hours they, as a hypothetical manager, would dedicate towards investigating the issue to better understand the context around it, using a sliding scale that ranged from 0 hours to 10 hours.

### *Forgiveness Versus Revenge Behaviours and Cognitions*

To examine participants' endorsement of revenge cognitions and behaviours, items from the Wade's Forgiveness Instrument (1989) were selected and adapted to better fit the context of the survey. The original scale contains 83 items, separated into nine underlying factors: some are cognitive, like revenge, freedom from obsession, affirmation and victimisation; others, like avoidance, toward God, conciliation and holding a grudge, are grouped by the behavioural factor; and positive and negative feelings belong to the factor affect. This scale was chosen due to its reported high reliability and internal consistency: previous analyses for Cronback alpha reliabilities and internal consistency reliabilities yielded results ranging from .79 to .95 and .72 to .95, respectively (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Furthermore, upon comparison of the mean responses of subjects to the items conducted during the original studies, a reported difference was found between responses given by subjects who forgive an offender and those who do not forgive (Wade, 1989). Unfortunately, after a reliability test on this particular dataset, it was found that the scales were of extremely low reliability, which will be discussed further in the limitations section.

For the purpose of this study, seven items from the scale were chosen and reworded slightly to better fit the context of a hypothetical scenario rather than a critical incident reflection, like used in previous research (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Aquino et al., 2001). Items were chosen based on relevance to the study, such as items from the cognitive factors of revenge and victimisation (two and three items, respectively) and items that evaluated tendency towards conciliation behaviours. Given the low reliability of the scale in the context of this study, I proceeded with an itemised analysis.



**Revenge and Victimization Items.** To assess revenge cognitions, the items from Wade (1989) “I want them to get what they deserve” and “I wish that something bad would happen to them” were reworded to “I would want the person to get what they deserve” and “I think something bad should happen to them”, respectively. Victimization cognitions were also assessed to view whether or not the participant did indeed feel wronged by the offender. I chose the items “I blame them” and “They wronged me” (Wade, 1989) and changed them to “I blame Arianne” and “Arianne wronged the others involved”, changing the statements from general ones that could be applied to a participants’ own past experiences, as done in previous research that utilised the Critical Incident Technique (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Aquino et al., 2001), to ones that specifically applied to our blame vignette. The reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha revealed poor reliability ( $\alpha = -0.012$ ), therefore a decision was made to proceed with an itemised analysis of the scale.

**Forgiveness items.** Two items to assess forgiveness cognitions were chosen from Wade’s conciliation subscale (1989) and reworded. The items were worded as follows: “I gave them back a new start, a renewed relationship” and “I wished them well” from Wade (1989), reworded as “Arianne deserves a fresh start” and “I wish Arianne well”. An analysis of reliability was conducted using Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha = -0.050$ ). Once again, this low reliability led to an itemised analysis.

### ***Quality Assurance and Demographics***

To isolate careless responders in order to eliminate their responses before conducting further analysis on our survey, we decided to include a few attention checks scattered throughout the survey (Kung et al., 2018). These are questions with obvious responses, with prompts like “to

show your attentiveness, please select ‘neither’”. The data of those participants who did not manage to pass the attention checks was eliminated and not considered in the analysis of the results.

At the end of the questionnaire, demographic information was collected. Participants were asked to inform us of their gender, whether or not they were currently a university student, age and an approximation of time they have spent in the workforce. We can then evaluate these differences in responses as swift blame cognitions can differ depending on a participant’s age, gender, education status and whether or not they have ever been in any sort of workplace scenario. The questionnaire concluded with allowing participants to add any comments they had towards the study and informing them that they could contact researchers if they were interested in the results of our study.

## Results

In order to conduct the analysis of the results, we used the statistical software SPSS (v. 26). The data was found to pass the basic normality and assumption checks. Given the fact that we conducted our study using a survey-questionnaire technique, manipulation checks were not necessary. The final sample consisted of 182 participants who provided their consent and completed the survey.

Recall that due to the poor reliability of the items that had been selected from Wade's Forgiveness Instrument (1989) I cannot combine them into any meaningful, single dependent variable. Instead, I will conduct an itemised analysis to remedy this. Several multiple linear regressions were run to assess the strength of the swift blame variables as predictors for each of the items measuring an individual's revenge and forgiveness cognitions. The most relevant items of the scale as dependent variables and the four items measuring an individual's engagement in swift blame as predictors were used. Items from the forgiveness scale that explicitly measured revenge and forgiveness cognitions (for example, "I would want Arianne to get what she deserves") were judged as more relevant and therefore selected for the regression analyses over the more general items that measured elements of blame or appraisals of the situation itself (i.e., "Arianne wronged the others involved"). In total, four multiple linear regressions were run. The items measuring participants' engagement in swift blame that were used as predictors were as follows: confidence in having enough information to answer the questions; information-processing effort; self-report effort, or the amount of effort the participants felt they placed into making the decision; and time, in hours, the participant would spend investigating the context of the situation in order to better understand it. To determine statistical significance of the predictive value of the independent variables, the criterion  $\alpha > .05$  was used (see Table 2).

## Main Analysis

The first multiple regression tested the predictive value of the swift blame variables for the dependent variable “I would want Arianne to get what she deserves”, a measure of revenge cognition. Overall, the results were not statistically significant. The predictors did not explain a statistically significant proportion of variance in the dependent variable (Table 1), resulting in  $p > .05$  and therefore a failure to reject the null hypothesis. The individual predictors “confidence”, “information”, “effort” and “time” all proved to not significantly predict this revenge cognition with  $p > .05$  (Table 1). Therefore, it can be concluded that these swift blame predictors cannot successfully predict an individual engaging in this revenge cognition.

“I think something bad should happen to Arianne”, a measure of revenge cognition, was used as the dependent variable in the next multiple regression. Overall, the results were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and the null hypothesis was rejected (Table 1). “Confidence” emerged as a statistically significant predictor, with  $p < .05$  (Table 1), therefore confidence in one’s information can be considered a statistically significant predictor for thinking something bad should happen to the offender. The predictors “information”, “effort” and “time” resulted in non-significant results ( $p > .05$ ) and the null failed to be rejected (Table 1). From these results, it can be concluded that these swift blame predictors, particularly “confidence”, can successfully predict engagement in this particular revenge cognition.

Next, a multiple linear regression was run to analyse the predictive value of the four swift blame variables for the dependent variable “I wish Arianne well”. The overall regression resulted in a non-statistically significant explanation of the proportion of variance in  $Y$ , resulting in  $p > .05$  and therefore a failure to reject the null hypothesis (Table 1). It was found that the predictors “confidence” and “information” did significantly predict an individual’s engagement in this

forgiveness cognition, with  $p$ -values less than .05 (Table 1), therefore more confidence in having sufficient information to make a decision and amount of effort placed into information-processing explain some of the variance in this dependent variable. Self-perceived effort proved to have marginally significant results and therefore could be said to have some predictive power for this particular forgiveness cognition. On the other hand, the predictor “time” resulted in non-significant results,  $p > .05$  (Table 1).

The final multiple linear regression tested the predictive power of the swift blame variables for participants’ belief in forgetting the past. The overall results were not statistically significant at  $p > .05$  (Table 1), hence the null was not rejected. Neither “confidence”, “information”, “effort” nor “time” resulted in statistically significant results, with  $p$ -values all greater than .05 (Table 1). Therefore, it can be concluded that none of these variables serve as useful predictors for this particular forgiveness cognition.

(Table 1) *Multiple Regression Analyses for Predicting Endorsement of Forgiveness and Revenge Cognitions with Individual’s Engagement in Swift Blame*

Predictors	“I would want Arianne to get what she deserves.”			“I think something bad should happen to Arianne.”			“I wish Arianne well.”			“I think the past should be forgotten.”		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Confidence	<b>-.096</b>	.082	.242	<b>.160</b>	.056	.005	<b>.108</b>	.054	.047	<b>-.008</b>	.001	.918
Information -effort processing	<b>-.191</b>	.156	.223	<b>.154</b>	.107	.151	<b>.207</b>	.104	.047	<b>.142</b>	.154	.358
Effort self-report	<b>.062</b>	.109	.571	<b>-.093</b>	.075	.214	<b>-.127</b>	.072	.082	<b>-.168</b>	.108	.120

Predictors	“I would want Arianne to get what she deserves.”			“I think something bad should happen to Arianne.”			“I wish Arianne well.”			“I think the past should be forgotten.”		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Time	<b>.076</b>	.052	.147	<b>-.026</b>	.036	.472	<b>.043</b>	.035	.214	<b>.002</b>	.051	.973
F(df)	1.267 (4, 174)			2.668 (4, 173)			1.925 (4, 174)			.661 (4, 174)		
	<i>p</i> >.05			<i>p</i> <.05			<i>p</i> >.05			<i>p</i> >.05		
Model R2	.028			.058			.042			.015		

Gender (1 = *male*; 0 = *female*)

(Table 2) Means, Standard Deviations and Pearson Correlation Matrix for Swift Blame

Predictors and Revenge and Forgiveness Items

Variable	M	SD	SB1	SB2	SB3	SB4	F1	F2	F6	F7
SB1	2.867	1.409	-							
SB2	3.434	2.188	-0.189*	-						
SB3	4.995	0.966	-0.133	0.189*	-					
SB4	5.116	1.384	0.044	0.196**	0.663***	-				
F1	4.379	1.856	-0.094	0.119	-0.055	-0.011	-			
F2	1.856	1.028	0.207**	-0.095	0.022	-0.047	0.058	-		
F6	5.648	1.018	0.102	0.076	0.081	0.014	0.157	-0.266	-	
F7	3.769	1.438	-0.028	-0.012	-0.014	-0.093	-0.144	-0.120	0.178	-

\**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001

*Note:* SB1: Confidence; SB2: Time; SB3: Information-effort processing; SB4: Effort-self report;  
F1: “I would want Arianne to get what she deserves”; F2: “I think something bad should happen  
to Arianne”; F6: “I wish Arianne well”; F7: “I think the past should be forgotten”

## Discussion

This paper strived to examine the relationship between swift blame and an individual's inclination to either forgive the offender or retribute them in favour of revenge. More specifically, I hypothesised that the individuals who engage in swift blame are more likely to engage in revenge cognitions and consequently opt for revenge behaviours was tested based on evidence from previous research that establishes blame as a predictor for revenge cognitions and behaviours (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Aquino et al., 2001). Engagement in swift blame implies that an individual relies on the automatic processing of a small, conveniently-available quantity of information in order to reach a conclusion (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Regardless of the little time and effort placed into their decision-making and the insufficient and possibly unreliable nature of the information they were provided, an individual's engagement in swift blame would indicate an inflated sense of confidence in both (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Taking this evidence into account, the following indicators were used in our study to measure the level of an individual's engagement in swift blame: level of confidence in having sufficient information to make a decision, amount of effort placed in processing the information provided, subjective evaluation of effort placed into making the subsequent decisions, and how much time (in hours) they would be willing to invest as hypothetical manager to understand the context surrounding the situation. These components were chosen as indicators of swift blame eng.

Upon analysing the results gathered from the questionnaire, it was found that there seemed to be an overall significant predictive power of the swift blame variables to predict one item measuring revenge cognition ("I think something bad should happen to Arianne"), though individually the predictors did not have statistically significant results. For the other three items of the forgiveness scale that were chosen, there overall was no significant predictive power of



swift blame engagement and forgiveness and revenge cognitions. Therefore, it can be concluded that the results obtained from the questionnaire are mixed, and offer weak (at best) support that swift blame can be used as a predictor of an increase in an individual's endorsement of revenge cognition.

### **Supporting Evidence for Hypothesis**

Nonetheless, some interesting insights can be drawn upon examining the parts of the analysis that showed some, albeit little, support for the hypothesis. The independent swift blame variables appeared to have statistically significant predictive power for participants wishing that something bad should happen to the offender. This is in agreement with people's tendency to need to "make things right" after having experienced an infraction on their perceived procedural justice (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Furthermore, this variable was negatively related with the predictors "self-perceived effort" and "time" (i.e., hours they would invest into understanding the problem), relating this revenge cognition more strongly to aspects involved in swift blame. This is in line with Sánchez & Dunning's (2021) research into individuals who frequently jump to conclusions (a process that shares multiple similarities with swift blame engagement) that says these individuals are unlikely to invest a lot of effort or spend time reflecting on the situation before arriving at a decision.

Moreover, confidence in one's final decision served as a statistically significant predictor for the revenge cognition "I think something bad should happen to Arianne" is in accordance with evidence from previous research that states that individuals who engage in swift blame are likely to interpret evidence later made available in a manner that supports their initial claim, a phenomenon known as blame-validation (Skarlicki et al., 2017). This *a posteriori* reasoning could result in an individual feeling more confident about the decision they made to reprimand

the offender. Furthermore, it also supports Sánchez & Dunning's (2021) hypotheses of JTC. These individuals, like those who engage in swift blame, are likely to be overconfident in the reliability and relevance of the information that they were provided (Sánchez et al., 2021). Moreover, more effort placed into information-processing, as well as self-perceived effort placed into the final decision, was shown to serve as a statistically significant predictor for a participant to wish Arianne well, which is congruent with the research stating that endorsing forgiveness cognitions signifies the abandon of initial feelings of anger and indignation felt towards the offender, choosing instead to foster feelings of love and compassion, making this a more effortful process than that involved in revenge cognitions that (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999).

### **Contradictory Evidence for Hypothesis**

However, it should be noted that a participant's level of confidence in the quality of the information given also proved to be a statistically significant predictor of this forgiveness cognition. This result is puzzling, seeing as previous research suggests feeling confident in one's decision despite having been offered little contextual information is more related to swift blame and therefore revenge cognitions (Sánchez & Dunning, 2021). This can either be due to a faulty hypothesis, poor reliability of the items or perhaps the wording of the scenario led the participants to believe they understood the scenario to an acceptable degree, something that will be explored further in the limitations section.

### **Limitations**

Though the evidence provides mixed results, this is not to say they are not important. This "misfire" unveils a plethora of unanswered questions, new avenues for research and chances to improve upon frameworks, both methodological and theoretical. The results are incongruent with findings extracted from other research studying blame as a predictor for revenge cognitions,

like Bradfield & Aquino (1999) and Aquino et al. (2001). To investigate the differences between this study and that of other researchers, we can examine both the methodological differences and ponder the possible presence of lurking variables.

### ***Methodological Differences***

The study conducted by Bradfield & Aquino (1999) and Aquino et al. (2001), as well as the thesis formulated by Bies et al. (1997), support the theory that the act of holding an offender accountable for an error (i.e., blames them) is one of strongest predictors for engaging in revenge cognitions and consequently behaviours. Methodologically, both utilised Wade's Forgiveness Instrument (1989), also having extracted certain items and reworded them for the purpose of their studies. However, some differences must be highlighted.

Firstly, in their cases, the rewording was made so that the items could reflect both cognitions and actual behaviours with regards to forgiveness and revenge. Though the items of this study did not differ greatly from those used by these studies, the rewording used was not exactly the same and therefore the reliability of the items must be questioned. Upon running a reliability check on the items a very low score was found, hence, the results must be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, the results show some promise to serve as an invitation for a more methodologically-sound approach to study these relationships.

Furthermore, while Bradfield & Aquino (1999) and Aquino et al. (2001) focused on general allocation of blame as a predictor for revenge cognitions, this study specifically looked at swift blame. Upon examining the antecedents and underlying processes of this phenomenon, one can see that at its core there is automatic processing and lack of thought placed into decisions (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Contrarily, individual endorsements of revenge and forgiveness cognitions require varying degrees of rumination and processing about the situation, offender and

one's own feelings regarding both of these factors (Aquino et al., 2001). Therefore, one can argue that the very nature of these two phenomena are incongruent, resulting in non-significant results.

Finally, the main methodological difference to be highlighted would be the technique used to elicit a situation from which blame appraisals were to be made by the participants. While this study used a hypothetical situation wherein participants needed to imagine a scenario where they were a manager dealing with an employee, these studies used the Critical Incident Technique, which required subjects to remember a specific, real-life incident that they had experienced in their current work environment where they were wronged by another. This has a number of implications. Our fabrication of a scenario introduced the possibility of lurking variables influencing the participants' decisions and appraisals of the situation. For example, our scenario placed the participant in the shoes of someone who's position in the organisation was that of higher power than that of the victim, which influences decisions to enact revenge on a wrongdoer in very complex and different ways, depending on the relative and absolute power dynamic within the organisation (Aquino et al., 2001).

### ***Alternative Explanations***

Furthermore, the imaginary nature of the scenario could have left participants too far-removed emotionally to truly experience the intense emotions that co-occur with a sense of disrupted procedural justice, which heavily influences the possibility of revenge cognitions and behaviours (Tripp & Bies, 2009). For example, evidence suggests that anger is one of the principal deterrents for forgiveness (Barber et al., 2005). A third possible lurking variable to be considered would be that of offender likeableness. The message in the scenario includes information detailing the offender's (Arianne) attempts to receive feedback and improve her

work performance. This could have improved participants' perceptions of Arianne, consequently lowering their inclination to endorse revenge cognitions, despite having engaged in swift blame (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). One hypothetical scenario can hardly capture all of these complexities that real-world experience does, but thus is the nature of research. In future studies, methodological improvements could be made to correct for the possibility of lurking variables. For example, certain items could be included to evaluate the emotional state of the participants after reading through the blame scenario to see if the hypothetical nature did indeed serve as a barrier for emotional responsiveness.

### ***Other Limitations***

The circumstances themselves surrounding our study presented several limitations. For example, one could argue that our sample was not the most representative of swift blame in organisations. Seeing as the research team mainly consisted of students and the participant pool was acquired through convenience sampling, more than 30% of the participants were university students, and some participants had no experience working in organisations whatsoever. This can make it hard for a participant to imagine themselves in a managerial position, making decisions that determine the future of a subordinate. However, that is not to say that these perspectives cannot offer any sort of valuable insight. Finally, one also has to consider the limitations that come hand-in-hand with using a questionnaire as means of research. There is less control offered than in scientific experimentation and threats like response styles (such as the tendency for a participant to respond consistently either more moderately or more extreme) and biases (for example, a participant being less willing to assign blame due to the social desirability bias) all pose danger to the reliability and validity of the data (Razavi, 2001). Nonetheless, questionnaire and survey methods offer valuable information, are cost-effective, and are well-suited to measure

phenomena that are heavily based on affect and attitudes (Razavi, 2001), and such is the concept of swift blame.

### **Further Research and Conclusion**

The limitations mentioned in the previous study open many doors for further research investigating the possibility of the listed lurking variables, such as emotionality and offender likeableness. Moreover, future studies that improve on the methodological structure can be conducted.

While little can be said (deriving from the results of this particular study) about its predictive power in revenge and forgiveness cognitions, a proliferation of swift blame in an organisation can result in a toxic work environment that leads to decreased employee morale, more negative workplace behaviours, and a decline in overall job satisfaction (Skarlicki et al., 2017). Understanding the antecedents to this quick (oftentimes unjustified) blame and its relation to forgiveness and revenge behaviours can aid in investigations on how to prevent this kind of execution of “justice”. For example, mindfulness has been shown to be associated with lower rates of aggression (which is positively correlated with revenge behaviours) and higher rates of interpersonal forgiveness by facilitating reflection and other-perspective taking (Karremans et al., 2020). Furthermore, the heightened self-awareness and capacity for reflection that mindfulness offers an individual can serve as a buffer against the tendency to rely on system 1 thinking (Fogel, 2021). Seeing as the reliance on automatic processing serves as a predictor for an individual participating in swift blame, employees in an organisation who participate in mindfulness exercises have been shown to engage less in this kind of behaviour, rendering mindfulness as a promising deterrent for swift blame (Skarlicki et al., 2017). This avenue of

research has been growing exponentially in recent years, with promising results, and will hopefully continue to do so.

Finally, while these results did not support the hypothesis in question, we can still learn from them. Perhaps engaging in revenge cognitions indeed cannot be predicted by an individual's engagement in swift blame and rather this has more to do with situational and individual factors. Or, on the other hand, possibly another scale or method would have more appropriately measured the phenomenon or more control for lurking variables needed to have been included in the original study. Statistically non-significant results do not equate to insignificant results, and one can arguably learn more from these failures than from a supported hypothesis. It is important to carefully consider all the possibilities that this research resulted the way that it did (methodological issues, lurking variables, unrepresentative sample, falsity of the hypothesis, etc.), lest we also fall prey to automatic processes and swift blame.

As said by Franklin P. Adams, "To err is human; to forgive, infrequent." In any human scenario, mistakes are bound to happen, some more severe than others. Unfortunately, "choosing the high road" is easier said than done, and when emotions and tensions are running high, revenge can provide instant relief and gratification. However, this is short-lived, and does not outweigh the numerous benefits that forgiving another can provide (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). In this way, forgiveness can be viewed as almost a selfish act that mends relationships and helps all, both offended and offender, achieve a higher state of well-being that is bigger than the problem itself. Perhaps this is the best revenge after all.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Blame Scenario Vignette**

“Assume you are the manager of a customer service support unit. Arianne, one of your employees, has a history of low performance and is frequently late for work. She has struggled with keeping up, completing tasks accurately, and providing adequate customer service. As a result, she was put on probation. However, lately she has made a noticeable effort to improve her work. You agree that she has arrived on time most days and is beginning to meet her performance targets. She has also been actively seeking feedback from her colleagues and customers in order to improve the quality of her work. Yesterday, you received a complaint from a client claiming that Arianne provided them with wrong advice, which cost the company a week in labour and external expenses. Arianne denies this claim. You look into the situation but it is not clear what actually happened. Because Arianne is on probation, you need to decide what to do.”

### **Appendix B: Reworded Items from Wade’s Forgiveness Instrument (1989)**

#### ***Reworded Revenge Items.***

“I would want Arianne to get what she deserves.”

“I think something bad should happen to Arianne.”

“I blame Arianne.”

“Arianne wronged the others involved.”

#### ***Reworded Forgiveness Items.***

“Arianne deserves a fresh start.”

“I wish Arianne well.”



“I think the past should be forgotten.”

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