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# "I Felt Like a Hero:" Adolescents' Understanding of Resolution-Promoting and Vengeful Actions on Behalf of Their Peers

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## Abstract

Bystander intervention on behalf of victims of peer aggression is credited with reducing victimization, yet little is known about how bystanders evaluate their intervention efforts. African-, European-, Mexican-, and Native-American adolescents ( $N = 266$ ) between 13 and 18 years ( $M_{age} = 15.0$ , 54% female) recounted vengeful and peaceful responses to a peer's victimization. For comparison, they also described acts of personal revenge. Youth's explanations of how they evaluated each action were coded for goals and outcomes. Befitting its moral complexity, self-evaluative rationales for third-party revenge cited more goals than the other two conditions. References to benevolence and lack thereof were more frequent after third-party revenge compared to personal revenge. Concerns that security was compromised and that actions contradicted self-direction were high after both types of revenge. Third-party resolution promoted benevolence, competence, self-direction, and security more than third-party revenge. Epistemic network analyses and thematic excerpts revealed the centrality of benevolence goals in adolescents' self-evaluative thinking. Self-focused and identity-relevant goals were cited in concert with benevolence after third-party intervention.

**Keywords** Third-Party revenge · Identity · Adolescents · Benevolence · Competence · Self-direction

## Introduction

"I felt like a hero, but no one else saw it that way." Subsequent comments by this ninth-grade boy detailed his remorse that he had unintentionally broken a thief's jaw when recovering a peer's electronic device. These reflections illustrate the moral ambiguity of third-party revenge, while illuminating how little we know about these

processes. Third-party revenge juxtaposes harm toward one party against efforts to promote the wellbeing of another. Greater understanding of the motivations and meanings that adolescents associate with their caregiving and harming may enable adults to better guide and support youth's efforts to protect and care for others. Due to its potential for escalating and spreading violence, third-party revenge has frequently been approached from the framework of delinquency and inter-group violence (e.g., Björge 2005), neglecting its normative role in peer relations. Adolescents' anger on behalf of, and empathy for, a peer victim promotes retaliation (Gummerum et al. 2016; Will et al. 2013), and more than a quarter of revenge events reported by Finnish high school students were exacted on behalf of a peer (Kivivuori et al. 2016). Third-party revenge is commonly enacted in U.S. primary and secondary school settings—by girls as often as boys (Frey et al. 2015; 2020a). Despite the apparent frequency of third-party revenge, it has received surprisingly little attention in the research on bystander intervention (for an exception see Hawkins et al. 2001). In particular, a literature search found no research on the goals underlying third-party revenge, or on how bystander interventions are evaluated and integrated into adolescents' sociomoral identities. The current study compares

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adolescents' experiences of third-party revenge to third-party resolution, a caregiving behavior that stops short of aggression. The study also compares third-party revenge to personal revenge, an aggressive retaliatory action that is committed for the self, and thus does not share a caregiving component.

### Caregiving Motivation and Identity

Since people around the world view caring for close others as their most important role (Ko et al. 2020), adolescents are likely to share similar views. Learning to be an effective and valued caregiver is a challenging task, especially when dealing with conflict and aggression. In addition to consoling victims, caregiving behaviors include aggressive attempts to protect others, secure justice (Buffone and Poulin 2014), and resolve problems (Pronk et al. 2018). Responding to peer victimization offers opportunities to *try out* caregiving behaviors and enact elements of a sociomoral identity such as role (e.g., friend, mentor) and valued traits (e.g., kind, competent; Patrick et al. 2019). Accounts of such efforts are thought to reveal the connections adolescents make between their actions and their identity (McLean et al. 2007). Research using basic psychological needs theory as a framework (Ryan and Deci 2017) indicates that people experience their actions as meaningful and reflective of their true selves when those actions are congruent with their values and meet fundamental needs for competence, social connection, and freedom from external pressure (Thomaes et al. 2017).

Believing that one's actions are congruent or incongruent with one's values and sociomoral identity (Lefebvre and Krettenauer 2019) elicits consequential self-evaluative emotions and thoughts. According to integrative models of moral motivation (Tangney et al. 2007), such experiences enable youth to anticipate how they will think and feel after future actions. Thus, knowing how youth evaluate their past personal revenge, third-party revenge, and resolution efforts provides insight into goals that may motivate more effective future caregiving actions.

### Motives Derived from Basic Psychological Needs Theory

Ryan and Hawley's (2016) model of benevolent action combines insights from theories of evolution (Tomasello and Vaish 2013) and basic psychological needs (Ryan and Deci 2017) to explain how benevolent action can satisfy three fundamental motives: competence, need for connection, and autonomy. In this view, competence goals would be met when individuals feel effective in challenging situations such as peer victimization. The need for connection with others is fulfilled when individuals feel their

benevolent actions matter to others' well-being, are appreciated, and reciprocated. Finally, autonomy goals are satisfied when individuals feel that caring actions are self-directed, congruent with their values, and emblematic of one's true self. These elements are interrelated; feeling ownership of one's actions increases perceived competence and the understanding that they reflect authentic caring and connection (Ryan and Deci 2017). Thus, it was expected that motives related to these needs would be evident in varying degrees when adolescents narrated past responses to victimization.

While desires for connection, competence, and self-direction are some of the motives that youth may have, not all goals express basic psychological needs or enhance well-being. In conflict situations, goals may include consistency with social norms (McDonald et al. 2015), revenge, dominance, and security (McDonald and Lochman 2012; Ojanen et al. 2005). To provide a fuller picture of youth' motivations, those designated by psychological needs theory were supplemented with the broader set of motives in Schwartz' value circumplex model (Schwartz and Boehnke 2004).

### Motives Derived from Schwartz' Value Circumplex Model

Schwartz' value theory defines values as desirable, trans-situational goals that serve to guide the pursuit of overarching principles in people's lives (Fontaine et al. 2008). In other words, values endure across situations, whereas goals are situation-specific instantiations of values. Although Schwartz makes a distinction between the two, given our inability to precisely define youth's statements as values or goals, the terms are used interchangeably. His circumplex model identifies eight major values (Schwartz and Boehnke 2004), defined by two dimensions: self- vs. other-focused, and prevention- vs. growth-focused. Self-enhancing values are prevention- and self-focused. They reflect desires for dominance over others (power) and competence and success (achievement). Self-transcending values are other- and growth-focused. They reflect concerns for all others (universalism) and for close others (benevolence). Openness to change values are growth- and self-focused. They emphasize a desire for excitement (seek stimulation) and reliance on one's own judgment (self-direction). Finally, conservation values are prevention- and other-focused. They emphasize the need for maintaining the status quo, respecting elders (conformity and tradition), and maintaining security (security).

Actions often have multiple motivations. Therefore, it is important to identify the *system* or combinations of goals that motivate behaviors (Ungvary et al. 2018). For example, if intervening peacefully to resolve peer victimization is viewed as both a benevolent and competent response, it may be

viewed as more identity-congruent, and warrant repetition more than if intervening peacefully is viewed as a benevolent but immature response. Risky social interactions are likely to be motivated by multiple goals that vary with each action.

Opportunities for goal fulfillment will also vary for each action and goal. The strong feelings of pride that youth report after peacefully resolving conflicts on behalf of peers (Frey et al. 2020a, 2020b) could reflect satisfaction with having helped another (benevolence) and with displaying social-emotional competence. After retaliating on their own or on a peer's behalf, adolescents report little pride, but high levels of shame, suggestive of a threat to self-identity. Given that the authentic or true self is believed to be moral and good (Strohming et al. 2017), revenge may especially threaten the goal of self-direction. Youth may also cite a goal of upholding norms. Pride is linked to anger after third-party revenge (Frey et al. 2020a, 2020b), suggesting an element of moral outrage that might encourage punishment of norm violators. An alternative route to upholding norms is suggested by adolescents' expectations that peers approve of third-party resolution more than third-party revenge (Frey et al. 2020a).

### Diverse Perspectives on Bystander Behavior and Identity

Past research on moral appraisal and identity has overwhelmingly focused on European American samples. To enable the contribution of voices that are too rarely heard in studies of bystander behavior and moral identity, an intentional sample was recruited that was evenly divided between African American, European American, Mexican American, and Native American youth. As Wang (2016) has noted, similarities between groups are as theoretically important as differences. Basic psychological needs theory posits universal similarities in the motivations that underlie behavior (Ryan and Deci 2017). In line with Ryan and Hawley (2016), people around the globe give the highest priority to caregiving (Ko et al. 2020) and benevolence (Schwartz and Bardi 2001). Studies in the U.S. find similar levels of pride after prosocial behavior among Mexican American, European American, African American, and Native American youth (Carlo et al. 2011; Frey et al. 2020a), and similar levels of remorse after harming. To our knowledge, no research has examined the relevance of basic psychological needs and human values to the everyday moral concerns of ethnically diverse American adolescents.

### Current Study

The current study appears to be the first to examine the motives and meaning that youth attach to acts of revenge

(third-party and personal) and conflict resolution. Participants were asked to explain their post-action emotions and appraisals, which were later coded to reveal the underlying goals and the perceived success or failure of each action. We used a deductive coding system to achieve three related aims. The first was to compare the rates at which goals were cited overall and in each condition. Benevolence was expected to be cited most frequently, followed by identity-relevant goals of self-direction and competence. (Readers may find it helpful to refer to definitions of codes in Table 1). Third-party revenge was expected to be viewed as both promoting and threatening benevolence and threatening self-direction. Security and power concerns were expected to be cited less in the third-party revenge condition than in the personal revenge condition, but more than in the third-party resolution condition. Third-party resolution was expected to promote benevolence and competence with fewer references to self-direction than personal revenge. Security and power were expected to figure prominently in rationales for self-evaluation after personal revenge. Personal revenge was expected to threaten and promote both goals, but to primarily threaten rather than promote benevolence and self-direction. Youth of all four ethnicities were expected to express similar goals in association with the three conditions.

The second aim was to gain insight into the systems of motives that adolescents referenced when evaluating themselves. Epistemic network analyses (ENA) were used to model constellations of goals in each condition. It was expected that benevolence would be a key element in the third-party revenge and resolution networks with strong links to competence and other goals. For the third and final aim, thematic excerpts were used to exemplify the specific ways adolescents construe their actions and to identify factors that may impede or facilitate their ability to enact identity-congruent behavior.

## Methods

### Participants and Context

Sample size was based on a pilot study that showed ratings of moral emotions and self-appraisals after bystander actions accounted for 13 to 47% of the between-condition variance. Sample size calculations for that study (Frey et al. 2020a) estimated that 28 interviews would provide 95% power at  $p < 0.05$ . The number was doubled to allow for the possibility of unpredicted gender or grade moderators. Thus, our goal was to collect at least 256 complete interviews, 64 from participants in each of four self-identified ethnicities: African American, European American, Mexican American, and Native American.



**Table 1** Modified value circumplex model, code definitions, and examples of goal promotion and goal threat

Schwartz' quadrant	Goal	Kappa	Expressed goal definition	Promotion examples	Threat examples
Self-transcendence <sup>a</sup>	Benevolence	0.65	Support wellbeing and safety of close associates	She felt better. They don't mess with her anymore.	I realized I was doing exactly what they had done to my friend.
Conservation	Uphold norms <sup>b</sup>	0.61	Support conformity to norms defined by peers, custom or family	That's what friends should do. I want her to do the right thing.	It [revenge] wasn't fair to her because she didn't do that much.
	Security	0.75	Seek self-protection, wellbeing and close social relationships	Now we're much closer. I didn't have to worry about a fight.	I was scared he would come back. It might break up our friendship.
Self-enhancement	Power	0.71	Control and dominate others to gain social standing and prestige	He got scared and understood me. He can't get too comfortable with me.	I lost, so fighting did no good.
	Competence <sup>c</sup>	0.75	Display competence, influence others or project a positive image	It was a way mature people handle such situations. What I said worked.	I made things worse [for friend].
Openness to change	Stimulation <sup>d</sup>	0.93	Seeking excitement, pleasure, novelty, enjoyment and daring	I was bored and wanted to see a fight.	He [friend] was a terrible fighter; I was disgusted.
	Self-direction	0.68	Act autonomously and according to image of one's true self	I didn't feel like I had to agree with my friend.	Your emotions just take you over at that moment and it's wrong.

<sup>a</sup>Universalism goals were not observed

<sup>b</sup>Modification of subscales, conformity and tradition

<sup>c</sup>Modification of achievement scale

<sup>d</sup>Includes hedonism subscale

The sample consisted of 128 middle and 162 high school adolescents. Interviews were conducted between May and September (2015–2017) so that participants had an entire school year upon which to reflect. Of the 290 interviews, 266 (91.7%) provided narratives in all three conditions (third-party revenge, personal revenge, and third-party resolution). Participants were 13–18 years of age ( $M = 15.0$ ) and had completed grades 7–12 ( $M = 9.0$ ). Of the 266 participants, 54.1% identified as female and ethnicities were identified as African American (26.3%), European American (23.3%), Mexican American (24.1%), and Native American (26.3%).

Participants lived in urban and rural areas of the northwestern United States. Nearly a third lived on lands belonging to Columbian Plateau Native Americans, whose traditional homelands extend across three states and two Canadian provinces. Participants attended one of 40 schools in which the percentages of students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch ranged from 12 to 99% ( $M = 61.9\%$ ). Participants attended schools in which the percentage of students with the same ethnicity as themselves ranged from 0.5 to 100% ( $M = 53.7\%$ ).

## Procedure

In addition to institutional review, a research permit was obtained from tribal authorities when appropriate. Consent was obtained from the participants' parents and assent from participants. Permission forms were distributed in community centers and summer school programs. Participants

received honoraria of \$20. Interviewers received an initial 4 h of training and a detailed protocol manual. They received feedback on practice interviews and monthly performance reviews. Interviewers and interviewees were matched on ethnicity.

To ensure that interview questions were relevant to a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse sample, the first author spent more than two years informally observing at schools and interviewing parents, students, and educators in multiple communities. Questions were developed iteratively and assessed with two sets of pilot interviews (see Frey et al. 2020a).

A purposeful sequence of questions was used to delineate parameters of the actions of interest and to prompt relevant memories. Participants were asked how often student sought revenge for themselves and others at school, and how often they helped resolve a peer's victimization peacefully. The interviewer then asked them to speculate on why youth might act in similar ways. In each of the three conditions, interviewers first provided a description and several examples of relevant behaviors. The prompt for *third-party revenge* was: "Think of a time that a young person hurt another student... Tell me about a time that you tried to get back at a person who mistreated the person you know". Comments established that actions need not be limited to physical aggression, "Maybe you didn't really *do* anything... maybe you said bad things about the person to your friends". The prompt for *first-party revenge* was: "Tell me about a time that you tried to get back at a young person who treated you badly, maybe by fighting them, excluding

them or saying bad things about them on Twitter”. Finally, the prompt for the *third party-resolution* explicitly used the word peaceful, “Tell me about a time...you tried to help a student work out a peaceful solution with a person after the student was treated badly or made to look bad. What did you do or say?” If participants provided an example that did not fit the condition, interviewers restated the type of action and gave participants time to reflect. Vengeful responses included starting a rumor, verbal humiliation, fights, and ambush aggression. Resolution efforts included mediating a conflict, assertively accusing others of being unkind or unjust, and stopping immediate retaliation, or alerting authorities. At the end of each narrative, participants were asked to rate emotions (pride, shame, guilt, relief, worry, anger, excited, disappointed, callous, and grateful) and appraise the described action (how helpful, indicative of a good friend, level of peer approval). Participants were asked to explain each rating.

If participants declined to answer a question (9.9% omitted one answer), we encouraged them to describe situations they had observed and then imagine how they would have felt if they were the actor. We did not question their veracity if pronouns later suggested that these stories were actually personal experiences.

## Coding

### Development of the coding system

**Goal codes** Because definitions of the values in the circumplex model (Schwartz and Boehnke 2004) are abstract, transituational constructs, they were modified to better fit the actions that participants were describing. The definition of *uphold norms*, is similar to values of tradition and conformity in the circumplex model. The *competence* goal reflects Schwartz’ focus on image and personal influence, but the context of social-emotional skill situates the definition closer to the competence construct in basic psychological needs theory (Ryan and Deci 2017). Refinements to the definition of *self-direction* de-emphasized Schwartz’ creativity aspect in favor of autonomy and consistency with personal values, another key element of basic needs theory. Definitions for *benevolence*, *power*, and *seek stimulation* did not vary from Schwartz’ model (Shown in Table 1 with examples and *kappas*). The abstract construct of universalism was observed too rarely to calculate intercoder reliability and was dropped. The same goal could be offered more than once within condition, as when benevolence was cited as a reason for pride and lack of benevolence was cited for guilt.

**Outcome codes** Two other codes indicated whether the goal was identified as promoted or threatened by the action

taken. Intercoder reliability was calculated using *kappa* to control for chance agreement, yielding  $k = 0.72$  for goal promotion and  $k = 0.83$  for threat.

### Coding procedures

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Three coders who were blind to hypotheses first identified examples that defined core elements and clarified goal boundaries before independent coding. Intercoder reliability, calculated between a graduate research assistant and each of two undergraduates, was required to reach least  $k = 0.60$  prior to generating the data. Once that threshold was reached, reliability checks were performed at three-week intervals until coding was completed.

## Results for the Quantitative Strand: Goal and Outcome Frequencies

### Analytic Plan

Our first aim used inferential statistics to compare the rates at which goals and outcomes were referenced in each of the three conditions. Analyses also examined whether rates were moderated by ethnicity. Given three repeated measures (condition, goal, and outcome) and four ethnicities, analyses were planned to reduce the probability of experiment-wise error. An overall split-plot mixed model ANOVA using all three conditions (third-party revenge, personal revenge, third-party resolution) and three outcomes (goal promotion, goal threat, and outcome unspecified) were followed by tests of warranted planned comparisons. Two sets of within-goal *t-tests* were planned, contrasting (1) third-party and personal revenge and (2) third-party revenge and resolution. Thus, each pairing differs on only one dimension. Within each condition, *t-tests* also compared frequencies of rationales that specified goals as promoted versus threatened. The Bonferroni correction set *alpha* at 0.001. Given the lack of information about the goals espoused by ethnically diverse Americans, a more liberal error-rate was adopted ( $p < 0.01$ ) to support exploratory analyses.

### Rates of Expressed Goals

#### Preliminary analyses

Because goals are not equally relevant in all situations, an a priori decision was made to analyze goals that were cited by at least 10% of participants in any condition. Only 9.5% of participants in the third-party revenge condition, 8.5% in the personal revenge condition, and 3.6% in the resolve condition referred to stimulation. It was not analyzed further,

reducing the probability of spurious results, and assuring that our quantitative results reflected the goals most important to adolescents in these situations. This left six goals for analyses: benevolence, competence, power, self-direction, security, and uphold norms. The initial analysis was a 3 (action type)  $\times$  6 (goal)  $\times$  3 (outcome)  $\times$  4 (ethnicity) split-plot mixed model ANOVAs with action type, goal, and outcome as repeated measures. Mauchly's test of sphericity indicated the need to use *Green-Geisser Adjusted F-goals* for the within-subject effects and interaction tests. Preliminary analyses analyzed results for the subsample who only described personally enacted events ( $n = 195$ ). The *F*-table for the subsample can be seen in Appendix A. It shows significant results that are virtually identical to the full sample with effect sizes ranging from slightly below to slightly above those of the larger sample. Given this evidence that our results are fairly robust indicators of youth's goals, analyses proceeded with the full sample.

The results of the mixed model ANOVA in Table 2 show effect sizes for all within-subject main effects and interactions ranging from 0.10 to 0.52. Interactions with ethnicity were negligible to small (range 0.01 to 0.05). Significant within-subject results are described first, then significant results for ethnicity.

Although modified by the predicted three-way interaction, main effects and lower-order interactions provide additional insight. Using a *p*-value of 0.001 to evaluate comparisons revealed that participants offered more goal-based statements when evaluating third-party revenge,  $M = 4.65$  (2.11) (SDs in parentheses), than personal revenge,  $M = 3.79$  (1.95), or resolution,  $M = 4.08$  (1.91), befitting the moral complexity of third-party revenge.

Adolescents clearly favored some goals over others (see Appendix B). Benevolence, or lack thereof,  $M = 1.42$  (0.81), was used to explain evaluative ratings for actions more than all other goals (all  $ps < 0.001$ ). Security, self-direction, and competence,  $Ms = 0.81$  (0.68), 0.75 (0.68) and 0.66 (0.59), respectively, were cited more than power,  $M = 0.29$  (0.40), and upholding norms,  $M = 0.23$  (0.36),  $ps < 0.001$ .

The second-order interactions provide a useful summary of youth concerns in each condition. Means for the action type by goal interaction are shown in Table 3. These indicated that references to security were less frequent in the third-party revenge condition than in the personal revenge condition, as were references to power. Benevolence and upholding norms figured more prominently in explanations of third-party revenge than of personal revenge. Compared to third-party resolution, third-party revenge showed relatively low rates of competence explanations, but high rates of self-direction explanations, all  $ps < 0.001$ . The significance of the concerns articulated by participants become clearer when actions were specified as promoting or threatening the cited goals.

**Table 2** F-values for goal citation frequencies as a function of action type, goal and outcome

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Partial eta</i> <sup>2</sup>
Action	1.99	28.68	<0.001	0.098
Action $\times$ ethnicity	5.96	<1	<i>ns</i>	0.007
Within person error	524.30			
Goal	4.22	144.08	<0.001	0.353
Goal $\times$ ethnicity	12.65	3.64	<0.001	0.040
Within person error	1113.58			
Outcome	1.51	282.24	<0.001	0.520
Outcome $\times$ ethnicity	4.53	4.42	0.001	0.048
Within person error	398.60			
Action $\times$ goal	7.37	73.10	<0.001	0.217
Action $\times$ goal $\times$ ethnicity	22.12	<1	<i>ns</i>	0.011
Within person error	1946.19			
Action $\times$ outcome	2.88	110.08	<0.001	0.294
Action $\times$ outcome $\times$ ethnicity	8.64	1.62	<i>ns</i>	0.018
Within person error	760.57			
Goal $\times$ outcome	6.60	59.89	<0.001	0.185
Goal $\times$ outcome $\times$ ethnicity	19.81	1.50	<i>ns</i>	0.017
Within person error	1743.25			
Action $\times$ goal $\times$ outcome	11.31	48.50	<0.001	0.155
Action $\times$ goal $\times$ outcome $\times$ ethnicity	33.92	1.30	<i>ns</i>	0.015
Within person error	2984.98			
Ethnicity	3	<1	<i>ns</i>	0.003
Between person error	264			

Degrees of freedom have Green-Geisser adjustments due to sphericity violations.  $N = 268$

### Goal promotion versus goal threat

Examination of the significant action type by outcome interaction indicated that adolescents described third-party revenge as promoting goals more than personal revenge,  $M = 2.09$  (1.83) and  $M = 1.15$  (1.38), respectively, but less than resolution,  $M = 3.29$  (1.80). Third-party revenge,  $M = 1.89$  (1.71), threatened goals more than resolution,  $M = 0.47$  (0.96), but did not differ from personal revenge,  $M = 2.02$  (1.68), *ns* at  $p < 0.001$ . Other interactions involving outcome are most clearly interpreted from examination of paired comparisons.

**Comparing revenge conditions** As shown in Table 3, third-party revenge was described as both promoting and threatening benevolence more than personal revenge. Similarly, third-party revenge was seen as promoting and threatening security less than personal revenge. Further, third-party revenge was described less frequently than personal revenge as promoting power. Within condition, both



**Table 3** Citation frequencies of each goal as a function of condition and outcome

Goal	Outcome	Condition					
		Third-party revenge		Personal revenge		Third-party resolution	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Benevolence	Promoted	1.04	1.19	0.03	0.25	1.68	1.28
	Threatened	0.60	0.89	0.41	0.65	0.16	0.47
	Unspecified	0.17	0.46	0.01	0.11	0.12	0.37
	Total	1.82	1.42	0.46	0.70	1.96	1.39
Uphold norms	Promoted	0.17	0.42	0.07	0.31	0.08	0.27
	Threatened	0.12	0.38	0.08	0.36	0.02	0.15
	Unspecified	0.08	0.28	0.01	0.12	0.03	0.22
	Total	0.39	0.70	0.17	0.50	0.14	0.40
Security	Promoted	0.27	0.57	0.54	0.88	0.35	0.66
	Threatened	0.37	0.67	0.58	0.79	0.13	0.44
	Unspecified	0.06	0.31	0.06	0.32	0.04	0.21
	Total	0.70	0.94	1.20	1.16	0.53	0.82
Power	Promoted	0.19	0.55	0.37	0.71	0.04	0.18
	Threatened	0.04	0.19	0.09	0.32	0.00	0.00
	Unspecified	0.07	0.33	0.06	0.27	0.01	0.11
	Total	0.30	0.66	0.53	0.86	0.04	0.21
Competence	Promoted	0.24	0.57	0.18	0.47	0.81	0.97
	Threatened	0.22	0.56	0.25	0.58	0.11	0.41
	Unspecified	0.07	0.30	0.03	0.16	0.06	0.23
	Total	0.54	0.84	0.47	0.76	0.97	1.05
Self-direction	Promoted	0.29	0.57	0.26	0.60	0.36	0.68
	Threatened	0.53	0.93	0.62	0.96	0.04	0.23
	Unspecified	0.04	0.21	0.06	0.25	0.02	0.17
	Total	0.86	1.04	0.94	1.07	0.44	0.81

*N* = 268

revenge actions were described as promoting power more than threatening it, but as threatening self-direction more than promoting it. The two types of revenge showed opposite patterns for benevolence. Third-party revenge was judged to promote more than threaten benevolence and personal revenge as threatening benevolence more than promoting it.

**Comparing third-party revenge and resolution** Each goal except power was described as promoted by third-party resolution more than it was threatened. Third-party revenge was described as a greater threat to security, benevolence, self-direction, and uphold norms compared to third-party resolution. Third-party revenge both promoted and threatened power more than third-party resolution. Third-party resolution efforts were more frequently construed as benevolent and competent than were third-party revenge.

## Analyses of ethnicity

No ethnic differences were hypothesized. Exploratory analyses showed that effects for ethnicity were limited to two interactions. One was ethnicity by goal. Comparisons using a *p*-value of 0.01 revealed that African American youth cited benevolence, *M* = 1.16 (0.77), less than Native American youth, *M* = 1.56 (0.86), but emphasized competence, *M* = 0.84 (0.65), more than Native American, *M* = 0.58 (0.44), or Mexican American youth, *M* = 0.43 (0.39). European American youth, *M* = 0.79 (0.74), also cited competence more than Mexican American youth. African American youth cited upholding norms as a consideration more frequently, *M* = 0.34 (0.46), than Mexican American youth, *M* = 0.14 (0.26). Although there was a significant ethnicity by outcome interaction, none of the paired comparisons were significant. Importantly, youth of all ethnicities viewed the three types of actions as similarly promoting and threatening of each goal.

Thus, U.S. adolescents of four ethnicities agreed that third-party resolution promoted valued goals more than third-party revenge, specifically with regard to benevolence and competence. Third-party revenge posed a greater threat to security, self-direction and uphold norms than resolution. Compared to personal revenge, third-party revenge promoted benevolence more but promoted power less. Both types of revenge threatened self-direction goals.

## Results for the Qualitative Strand: Patterns of Goals and Behaviors

### Analytic Plan

This strand reports on connections between goals associated with each action, as modeled using epistemic network analyses. ENA was originally developed to model theories of discourse and culture which argue that the connections people make in discourse are a critical level of analysis. ENA has been used to model behaviors such as speech and gaze coordination during collaborative work (Shaffer 2017), and emotion co-occurrence (Frey et al. 2020a). ENA is an appropriate technique for any context in which the structure of connections is meaningful. ENA was used to visualize systems or constellations of goals and to compare the aggregations of individuals' constellations across action type. Data were modeled using the ENA Web Tool, version 1.7 (Marquart et al. 2018) and defined the units of analysis as all goals associated within a single action for each participant. Networks were aggregated across individuals using an unweighted summation in which the networks for each action reflect the log of the product of each pair of goals.

The ENA algorithm analyzes all the networks simultaneously so networks that can be compared visually and statistically. To contextualize results and delve further into connections and questions revealed by ENA and quantitative analyses, thematic excerpts of participant thinking are provided last.

### Goal and Outcome Networks

Relationships between the qualitative aspects of youth's meaning-making were visualized using network graphs where nodes correspond to goals and outcomes, and the connecting edges reflect the relative frequency of co-occurrence between two goals or between a goal and an outcome, as illustrated by line width and saturation. Goal node positions are fixed on the X and Y dimensions, determined by an optimization routine that minimizes the difference between each plotted point and the associated network centroids. The centroids (indicated by solid boxes) in Fig. 1a represent the mean of the plotted points for each goal within each action type. The dotted perimeters indicate the 95% confidence intervals on the X and Y dimensions. The amount of overlap between mean plotted point confidence intervals are interpreted the same as single dimension confidence intervals. The Y-axis appears poised between aspirations for self-identity (self-direction) at the top and concerns about security at the bottom. It appears to correspond to the dimension of growth versus protection (Schwartz and Boehnke 2004). Notably, none of the actions yielded explanations that specified both self-direction and security. The greatest variation between the three actions is on the X-axis, which mixes self- and other-focused goals. The centroid for third-party revenge is positioned midway on the x-axis, closer to personal revenge than to third-party resolution.

Inspection of the third-party revenge network (Fig. 1b) reveals the nuance in young people's thinking. The centroid is positioned between promote and threaten and mirrors the way individuals described their personal goals as simultaneously yielding both outcomes, particularly for benevolence. Explanations linked benevolence with self-focused goals of self-direction, competence, and security. Links were also found between benevolence and uphold norms. Power was linked only to the goal of uphold norms, but as in the quantitative analyses, was not a key element of third-party revenge goals.

The personal revenge network (Fig. 1c) shows strong links that promote and threaten have with security. The centroid is located on the prominent axis of threatened security and threatened self-direction. Benevolence was primarily linked to threat, as was competence, whereas power was linked to promotion. A notable aspect of the personal revenge network is that links between goals were

weak. Subtractive networks showing the unique elements of personal versus third party revenge and third-party revenge versus resolution are found in supplementary materials (Supplementary Fig. 2).

The centroid for third-party resolution (Fig. 1d) is located within the triangle of strong links between benevolence, competence, and promotion. When young people acted benevolently, they also felt competent. Self-direction and security also have moderately strong connections to benevolence and promotion. As in the third-party revenge network and absent in the personal revenge networks, the centrality of benevolence is clear. No other goals in any of the networks show strong links to other goals—only to threaten and promote nodes.

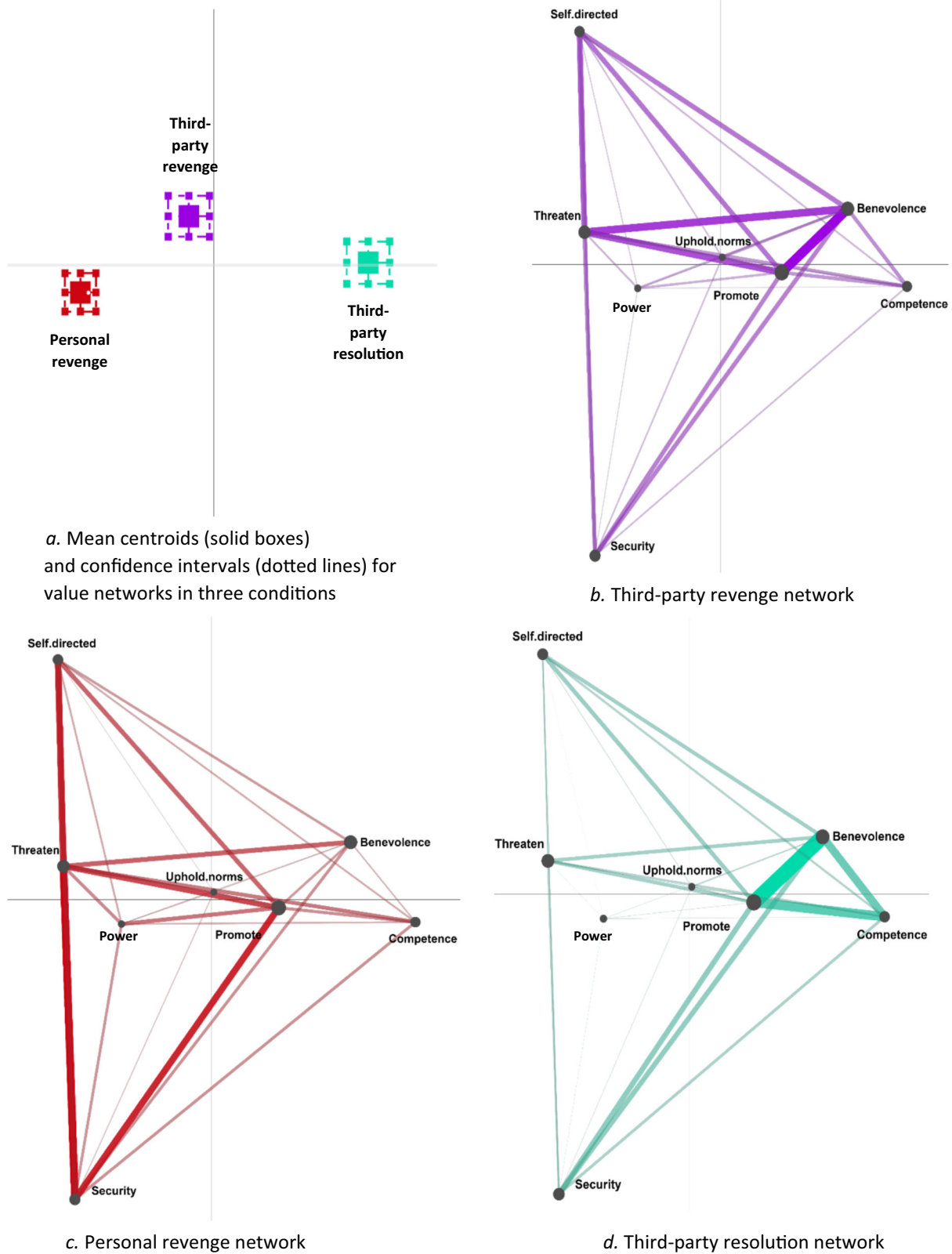
Thus, the constellations of goals for each type of action support the importance of benevolence for third-party resolution and revenge indicated by frequency analyses. They add new information by showing how identity-relevant goals are linked to benevolence.

### Thematic Excerpts

Excerpts from participant narratives were used to contextualize and support the themes that emerged in the mixed model and ENA. Based on the ENA and the thesis that interventions into a peer's victimization are identity-relevant, examples first elaborate the connections between benevolence and the self-focused codes of competence and self-direction. These examples also illuminate factors that youth believed influenced benevolent actions and identity. The second set of examples explore the multiple meanings of security, the second most frequently cited goal. Examples are edited for length.

#### Self- and other-focused goals are interwoven

The following examples indicate that caring for others is congruent with desired identities whereas harming others is not. The hypothesized connection between benevolence and competence was evidenced when youth appraised third-party resolution. Their resolution efforts were sometimes offered as evidence of increasing maturity. As a European American male stated, "I was proud of myself because I made the situation less violent and it was more of a way mature people should handle the situation." Both competence and self-direction were expressed when a Native American male was proud that he did not jump to conclusions and resisted peer pressure, "I listened to the full story before I started assuming stuff...[Some people] will feel pressured to agree to one side and...they need to agree with their friend and have the same opinion with them." He used the occasion to socially compare his response to perceived pressure with those of imagined or actual peers. While



**Fig. 1** Epistemic networks of values cited when appraising three actions. Widths of edges indicate strength of linkages. Nodes minimize distance between each point and the centroids

benevolence could provide warm feelings, as in “It felt good to help,” when references to benevolence were accompanied by competence and self-direction, youth identified the specific elements of their benevolent actions that contributed to aspects of identity.

The inverse relationship, that harming was antithetical to desired identities, was voiced when threats to benevolence were also viewed as threats to self-direction, expressed as strongly remorseful feelings of inauthenticity. These feelings centered on harm to the other person, especially if retaliation was judged to be disproportionate. An African American female noted, “I’m not this person, like I shouldn’t go this far. It was bullying to the max and I didn’t want her to hurt herself or anything.” Here the concerns for the other person’s welfare that were aroused by the participant’s own actions conflict with her sense of herself; she disavows the connection between those actions and her authentic self.

The risk of disproportionate retaliation was heightened by emotional arousal. A poignant example showed a African American male’s disgust at his own macho posturing, “I felt disappointed because that isn’t really me, really...I felt ashamed because I was, I am, talking all that talk and stuff. And I felt guilty because I was talking about hurting him.” Arousal levels that interfered with the ability to think were explicitly cited as threats to self-direction. For instance, a Mexican American female stated, “That’s usually not how I am. I got mad so quick and everything happened so quick, I just wasn’t myself.” These comments did not seem to be offered as excuses, as the loss of personal control was considered an indication of immaturity as noted by a Native American male, “I could have been the bigger man...but instead I start letting my actions control what I say.” While loss of self-direction and autonomy is often associated with external control, here the threat was in the internal loss of control.

Occasionally, experiencing harming as an identity threat was cited as a turning point. Third-party revenge seemed to lend itself to insight, as for this Mexican American female, “I was doing exactly what they had done to my friend...I was really ashamed...that’s not the type of person I am today and that kind of situation is what changed my opinion to what it is now.” Taken as a whole, these examples reveal how youth try to resolve threats to identity when their actions are inconsistent with benevolence. As predicted, actions that both promoted and threatened goals linked benevolence with self-focused goals in meaningful ways.

### Security and risk in physical and relational domains

As one of the goals that were secondary in frequency to benevolence, security was clearly important to

participants. An interesting finding that emerged through thematic analyses was that security referred to both physical and relational security, a distinction not captured in the coding system. Excerpts provided evidence that adolescents construed their actions as risky in multiple domains. Participant concerns about counter-retaliation and physical security were naturally heightened in the personal revenge condition. Physical safety could also be threatened if anxiety disrupted the concentration needed to work safely in metal shop, hence this Native American male’s relief at a successful resolution, “I got my mind off hoping he [Native youth bullied for traditional long hair] doesn’t do anything rash.”

Surprisingly, security concerns were equally common in the third-party revenge and resolution conditions, albeit primarily in regard to relational security. Even ostensibly benevolent efforts might not be appreciated by the beneficiary, as in the case of third-party revenge executed by an European American male, “We [sic] stepped in, threw a punch and that was it...I thought I helped a little bit, but I stopped him from dealing with the situation in his own way.” Here regret is exemplified by the initial failure to identify the actor as himself alone. The actor becomes visible when he discusses the discrepancy between his perspective and that of the victim. Third-party resolution offered similar perspective-taking challenges. While youth might express satisfaction that resolving problems with aggressors solidified their relationships with victims, connections could also be threatened. Attempts to mediate a conflict might entail challenging a friend’s actions, or self-presentation as a victim. Playing what some young people referred to as a *counselor role* could strain relationships, as was communicated by a Native American female,

When she gets mad at that girl, I just tell her ‘Oh, you did the same thing to her, you can’t just forget, you can’t be a hypocrite’...I felt proud because I tried to... help her to see the bigger picture [how others feel]...I felt worried that she would turn her anger toward me because I wasn’t going with what she was saying.

While adolescents were aware of risks they undertook, relationship security was largely promoted by third-party resolution, consistent with the quantitative results and ENA for security. Concerns about how acceptable specific benevolent strategies were to the recipient and the risk of threat to relational security illustrate the perceived importance of benevolent acts for connection.

The thematic excerpts related to security were exploratory, offering new information that complemented rate and network analyses. The excerpts related to benevolence supported results of rate and network analyses. Taken as a whole, three different methods affirmed predictions that

benevolence would a powerful motivator for third-party revenge and resolution, and that benevolent actions have important implications for adolescent identity.

## Discussion

Despite the importance given to the actions of bystanders in peer victimization, research has neglected adolescents' goals and concerns when they avenge victims or promote a peaceful resolution. Consistent with basic psychological needs (Ryan and Hawley 2016) and human values models (Schwartz and Boehnke 2004), self-appraisals of African American, European American, Mexican American, and Native American youth were primarily based on whether their actions promoted benevolent goals. Self-direction, competence, and security were important secondary goals. Adolescents also agreed that they were more likely to attain their goals by helping a peer resolve conflict peacefully than by avenging their peer, although third-party revenge was viewed as promoting goals more than personal revenge. Both mean rate comparisons and epistemic network analyses revealed that adolescents viewed each type of revenge as thwarting goals more than third-party resolution.

### Benevolence as a Nexus of Motivation and Identity

The salience of benevolence for third-party intervention is consistent with evolutionary perspectives that include third-party revenge within the framework of caregiving (Buffone and Poulin 2014) and other actions that promote human cooperation and survival (Tomasello and Vaish 2013). Third-party resolution was viewed as most likely to accomplish benevolence and competence goals, which were tightly associated in the epistemic network for third-party resolution. Indeed, benevolence was central to youth's reasoning about both third-party revenge and resolution. Specifically, network analyses showed benevolence was cited in concert with self-direction, competence, security, and uphold norms. Other goals were only weakly related to each other. Thus, both the rates and structure of goal citations suggest that benevolence occupied a place of epistemological centrality that was uniquely linked to different facets of identity-related goals in the context of third-party intervention. Benevolence, competence and self-direction are key elements of well-being (Martela and Ryan 2016). While empathy alone may provide sufficient motivation for benevolent action (Do et al. 2017), motives are difficult to isolate in life. Beliefs that peers approve of benevolent actions predict actions to protect peers (Buckley et al. 2010), as do beliefs that one's status will improve as a result (Pöyhönen et al. 2012).

Benevolent acts may address important needs in both parties, such as the victim's need for security, the bystander's need to feel competent and morally good, and both parties' need for connection (Ryan and Hawley 2016).

### Self-Direction and Security Concerns Linked to Revenge

In contrast to the centrality of benevolence in the two third-party conditions, thinking about personal revenge focused on security and threats to self-direction. Network analyses situated the nodes for prevention-oriented security and growth-oriented self-direction at opposite ends of the y-axis, with no connections between them. Strong security concerns may promote such a narrow self-focus that it is difficult to consider whether harming represents one's best, most authentic self. Whether youth focused on personal security or personal identity, both concerns contributed to the high rate of goal threat reported after personal revenge, when compared to third-party revenge.

Both revenge actions were notable for threats they posed to self-direction. Youth expressed particular remorse if they viewed their response as disproportionate to the initial harm, as when anger led to behavior that was later deemed inconsistent with personal standards. Youth suggested that internal factors like emotional arousal could threaten self-perceived autonomy as much as external pressure. Several noted how anger could derail best intentions, as when their resolution efforts did not receive a respectful hearing, and they became instantly aroused to the point of retaliating. Other research has noted fluid boundaries, moving from revenge to resolution (Recchia et al. 2020). Thus, aggressive behavior may also be governed by morally-relevant personal standards.

### Caregiving Narratives and Sociomoral Development

Except for three students who struggled to decide whether intervening in victimization was a friend's duty or a time to "mind your own business", students did not question *whether* to act but *how* to act. Attempting to discourage retaliation, youth employed strategies that might be familiar to parents (e.g., emotion coregulation, advice, exhortation; Loughheed et al. 2016). Resolution efforts could lead to conflicts if victims disagreed on the appropriate response to their victimization. Relationship risks and the leadership required when acting as peacemakers may promote identity-focused thinking. Adolescents' apparent recognition of the developmental significance of their actions is suggested by the references to maturity and mentoring roles that were unique to third-party resolution.



Given developing identities as “benevolent” actors, adolescents’ willingness to accept risk, and the potential social benefits of benevolent actions; early and mid-adolescence may be an opportune time for educators to promote defending and third-party resolution attempts. As evidenced by the girl whose shame over retaliatory bullying led her to construct an identity as a “different person,” remorse over past actions can create a personal turning point (McLean et al. 2007). While narratives of past help-giving have shown potential for promoting self-insight and moral identity (Recchia et al. 2015), using narratives of third-party revenge to elicit self-evaluative emotions and reasoning may also be beneficial.

Third-party revenge narratives were ambivalent and morally nuanced. This complexity was reflected in more extensive reasoning compared to personal revenge and third-party resolution. As expected, stories of third-party revenge cited successful benevolent actions more than personal revenge stories. Surprisingly, failures of benevolence were also cited more frequently than after personal revenge. Perhaps the elements of empathy, responsibility, and prosocial intentions toward one person, juxtaposed against harm to another stimulates morally complex thinking, such that empathy toward adversaries also becomes salient. Supportive questioning that emphasizes actors’ feelings, as in the current study, might guide insights that help youth define which actions represent their best, most authentic selves.

A variation on this theme is that benevolent actions on behalf of the victim may act as a buffer to feelings of moral threat elicited by harm toward an aggressor. This may simulate a value-affirmation intervention. Experimental tests indicate that reflecting on important personal values bolsters a secure sense of self and reduces defensiveness (Cohen and Sherman 2014), thereby enabling challenging self-reflections. Our procedures may have potentiated self-reflection by specifically asking for explanations of self-evaluative emotions (pride, shame, guilt). Ambivalent emotions such as those associated with third-party revenge (Frey et al. 2020a) are particularly conducive to improved decision-making and psychological growth (Vaccaro et al. 2020).

### Limitations and Future Directions

Without an experimental design, no conclusions can be drawn regarding causality in the relationship between responses to victimization and the goals articulated by youth. Related to this limitation is that time since the event might affect both evaluation and understanding of motivation. Events that happened at the beginning of the year, for example, provided more opportunity to analyze one’s actions and possibly resolve problems than events at the

end of the school year. Knowing exactly when events occurred might have enabled us to know whether understanding changed over time. Another disadvantage of using actual events is the variability in the events themselves. Self-evaluation and meaning are likely to vary with the types of offense and response (Gerlsma and Lugtmeyer 2018). Future studies might investigate the influence of revenge type or the degree of equivalence between the original aggression and revenge. Perceived equivalence between the capabilities of victim and aggressor might also affect appraisals and decisions to act. Despite variability in timing and severity of events in the current study, differences between groups were robust and consistent with hypotheses.

An important caveat is that these were community samples and results might not generalize to youth deeply engaged in high-risk activities. This study’s focus on commonalities in participants’ explanations of their self-appraisals does not negate the importance of individual differences in preferred responses to aggression or in how youth construe their behavior. Indeed, three examples of delayed personal revenge were exceptional for the actors’ lack of remorse, desire to subjugate, and the severity and strategic nature of the revenge. The contrast between these examples and those of the other participants emphasizes the near unanimity of youth’s value-related judgments.

### Conclusion

Adolescents respond to a peer’s victimization variously with skill, clumsiness, escalation and peaceful resolution. Given the potential for harm and benefit, the lack of research into the goals and meanings that adolescents ascribe to their interventions is surprising. Adolescents deal with challenging issues and would benefit from knowledgeable adult support. With that larger aim in mind, the current study extended bystander research to examine how adolescents evaluate their actions, with a particular emphasis on the goals and moral concerns of ethnically and socioeconomically diverse adolescents—voices that are rarely included in research relevant to sociomoral identity. Goals such as benevolence, self-direction, competence, and security were readily accessed by youth when they described and evaluated past acts of third-party revenge, personal revenge, and third-party resolution efforts. Third-party resolution was notable for yielding satisfying outcomes with respect to benevolence, competence, self-direction, and social connection, factors that independently predict well-being on a daily and long-term basis (Martela and Ryan 2016). Beyond the satisfactions that peer caregiving may impart, are opportunities for growth. Third-party revenge

was notable for eliciting morally nuanced narratives that may have potential for promoting development of moral agency and constructive bystander behavior. More broadly, the challenges that teens encounter when advising friends to resolve problems peacefully may promote perspective-taking skills. With peers, more than with parents and siblings, teens must determine how to provide care in ways that are acceptable to the recipient or else risk the loss of the relationship. Because caring for peers is often more volitional than caring for family members, the impact on adolescent caregiver identities may also be greater. Thus, engagement in peer caregiving may foster sociomoral motivation and skill development.

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**Data Sharing and Declaration** This manuscript's data will not be deposited.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Washington and the National Institute of Justice. When appropriate, a research permit was obtained from tribal authorities. This study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians and informed assent was obtained from the interviewees.

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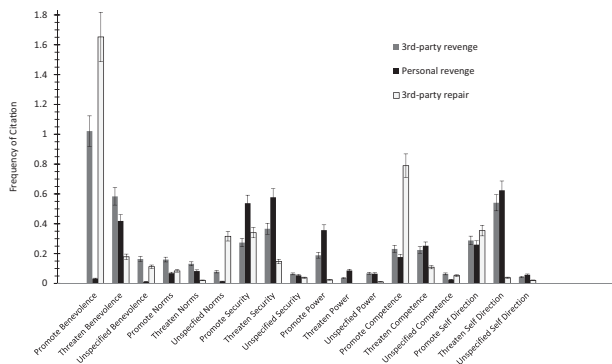
## Appendix A. Subsample F-values for citation goal frequencies as a function of action type, goal and outcome

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Partial eta</i> <sup>2</sup>
Action	2.00	17.96	<0.001	0.086
Action × ethnicity	6.00	< 1	<i>ns</i>	0.008
Within person error	374.20			
Goal	4.22	109.59	<0.001	0.365
Goal × ethnicity	12.67	2.37	0.002	0.036
Within person error	805.11			
Outcome	1.38	240.39	<0.001	0.556
Outcome × ethnicity	4.14	2.63	0.033	0.040
Within person error	263.51			
Action × goal	7.39	58.55	<0.001	0.235
Action × goal × ethnicity	22.16	< 1	<i>ns</i>	0.011
Within person error	473.42			
Action × outcome	2.85	80.85	<0.001	0.297
Action × outcome × ethnicity	8.55	1.52	<i>ns</i>	0.023
Within person error	244.86			
Goal × outcome	6.63	42.68	< 0.001	0.183
Goal × outcome × ethnicity	19.90	1.31	<i>ns</i>	0.020
Within person error	6233.30			
Action × goal × outcome	11.21	36.12	<0.001	0.159
Action × goal × outcome × ethnicity	33.62	1.26	<i>ns</i>	0.019
Within person error	1047.61			
Ethnicity	3	< 1	<i>ns</i>	0.015
Between person error	60.47			

Degrees of freedom have Green-Geisser adjustments due to sphericity violations.  $N = 195$

## Appendix B. Goals and outcomes cited when appraising actions

Columns show mean frequencies of citations for each action. Error bars show standard deviations



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