

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Grudge: the emotional side of resentment

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Due to the rise of radical right-wing movements and the political flourishing of conspiracy myths, sociology in recent years has increasingly focused on the functioning of resentment. However, little attention has been paid to the fact that resentment is not only a specific attitude but is also accompanied by typical emotions. Grudge, or rancour, as it is also called in English, are these emotional sides of resentment and form the affective ground of resentful attitudes. In this article, grudge will be explained in its phenomenological characteristics, its emotional structure, its historical change, in its psychoanalytical dimensions and sociological explanations and, finally, in its current social and political significance.

Phenomenological characteristics

To begin with some phenomenological characteristics of grudge, its tonality reminds us of natural phenomena like rolling thunder and heat lightning. Like a wave of heavy rocks crashing onto a pebbly beach, the roll of thunder rises muffled and threatening in the distance. It is a warning that a thunderstorm will soon erupt. In the dark clouds that the storm gathers, enormous electrical voltage builds that then suddenly strikes the ground as lightning. In an instant, it heats the air around it and a shock wave forms whose echo reaches us as a mighty clap of thunder. Plasma physics recognises the roar of thunder as a harbinger of a sudden rise in temperature that charges matter and changes it into a different state of aggregation. The rumbling that gives the rising thunder its dark, dull, sinister sound is an internally smouldering state that bodes ill.

Turning to the etymology of grudge, in German the word for this is *Grollen*. According to the standard *Duden* dictionary, *Groll* stands for secret, entrenched animosity or concealed hatred, and a suppressed displeasure that is prevented from turning outward by internal or external resistance. It corresponds to the English ‘grudge’ or ‘rancour’. This rancour takes on a specific tonality: muttering and murmuring, the dark tonal colours or timbres are also evident in the English ‘grumbling’ and ‘grunting’. Old German also used the words *Grimm* (ire) and *Ingrimm* (wrath) to express its tense, cramping nature, which is also related to the English ‘grim’ or ‘grimace’.

Emotional structure

Today, linguistic research agrees that the German noun *Groll* presumably came from the Middle High German adjective *grel*, meaning coarse and irate. In fact, a grudge is a quiet, secretive relative of anger or wrath; it is passive and turned inward, whereas its affective sibling actively turns its agitation outward. Holding a grudge against someone does not take place out in the open. Consequently, it is not easy to recognise and even more difficult to overcome. Such rancour is a deep-seated emotion. It carries around anger, displeasure, a deep antipathy or silent hatred for a long time. It is a constant guest in a person's emotional household. Anger and outrage have their respective triggers and their specific object. They are loud, heated and eruptive in making themselves heard. Once someone shouts out the injustice they experience, the anger and outrage can evaporate, but a grudge continues to smoulder below the surface of one's behaviour. Third parties sometimes become aware of it when it eats its way into the body of the aggrieved person as latent aggression. A comment might come out too harshly without there being any apparent reason for it, and facial expressions stiffen and take on contemptuous features.

The grudge looms silently, waiting for an opportunity to break out of the inner prison it feels locked into, so it can retaliate, strike back and deliver a counterblow. But this longed-for revenge is often more of a pipe dream and a quietly imagined fantasy than anything that can actually come to be. People holding a grudge continue to face obstacles everywhere – a feeling of weakness and inferiority, fear of visible standing out, of risky situations in which they do not know what would follow an outburst of rage. A grudge is a feeling that 'wants to be more, but cannot' (Jensen, 2017: 33, transl. SN). People who feel weaker can sometimes let their rancour out at someone whose position does not call for caution. If such opportunities are lacking, and if one's grudge is perceived as hopeless, then the emotion can also freeze and turn to icy coldness. Then bitterness sets in, the long-lasting, mistrustful sense of having got the short end of the stick, which others should then see how bad it makes the aggrieved person feel.

Cultural history: epic legends

The cultural history of grudge knows many epic legends. Two examples are useful to illuminate this. In the *Iliad*, it is reported that it was grudge and rancour that triggered the Trojan War. Eris, the goddess of discord, was disgruntled as the only Olympic goddess who was not invited to the wedding of King Peleus to the sea nymph Thetis. 'Filled with rancour', as the *Iliad* told, she threw the golden apple of discord with the inscription *Kallisti*, 'for the most beautiful', into the banquet hall, over which Zeus's daughters Athena and Aphrodite and his wife Hera fought without results. In the end, it was finally left to Paris, Prince of Troy, to decide. As a reward, he chose Helen as the most beautiful woman, already married to the King of Sparta. When Paris abducted her, the united Greek armies set out against Troy to take bloody revenge.

Friedrich Schiller also left us a royal presentation of rancour in his play *Mary Stuart*. The Earl of Shrewsbury, an advocate for the outcast Queen of Scots, pleaded with her to exercise moderation in her conflict with Elizabeth I for the English throne. Mary, however, who had already experienced years of humiliation by Elizabeth, refused. Unchecked, her outrage broke out of her: 'Moderation! I've supported / What human

nature can support: farewell, / Lamb-hearted resignation, passive patience, / Fly to thy native heaven; burst at length / Thy bonds, come forward from thy dreary cave, / In all thy fury, long suppressed rancour!' (Schiller, 1801: 129).

In real life, we confront rancour or grudge less among those of high standing. However, it is no coincidence that among those of rank, it is much more often the women whose rancour is passed on to us in literature. In the struggle for power and prestige, it is mostly women who must submit and whose self-esteem suffers. As betrayed wives, as compromised persons, or targets of publicly staged degradation, even if they have high standing, they are the ones forced to accept being humiliated by men or victimised in intrigues. Since any protest seems to be inconceivable, the grudge burrows itself into female emotional life. One and a half centuries later, Simone de Beauvoir (2010 [1949]: 127) described a similar constellation in her classic *The Second Sex* when she depicted 'nagging' as a helpless form of female rebellion deriving from a rancorous realisation of women's powerlessness in a patriarchal society.

Psychoanalytical perspectives

According to clinical psychoanalytical practice, it is mostly people who were severely injured early on who bear a long-lasting grudge. Children who had been institutionalised, victims of abuse and people who have been toyed with for a long time are prototypically considered especially prone to holding a grudge. The specific problem that therapy for such resentment struggles with confirms how deep-rooted the injury is. As Heinz Weiss, co-director of Frankfurt's Sigmund Freud Institute, explained in his studies: 'It is difficult to interpret resentment without giving renewed cause for hurt and offense. On occasion, it seems almost impossible to interpret humiliation without exposing the patient to a renewed experience of it' (Weiss, 2019: 25). Weiss also suggested using the role of the gaze to differentiate feelings of offence such as rancour, shame and rage. Rancour involves an upward gaze from below that is accusatory, chronic and reproachful. On the other hand, someone who is ashamed is faced with a situation of being looked down on in a humiliating way. Rage, in turn, directs the gaze downward from above, self-righteously judging the behaviour of others from this elevated position. These modes of seeing and being seen correspond to emotional reactions. In rage, we are sure of ourselves and make a judgement about others. The force of rage comes from the assumption of being in the right. Shame signifies that we are exposed, unmasked, becoming the object of humiliation. A grudge expresses a feeling of having suffered injustice, which demands compensation and redress.

What is specific to the rancour here is that it protects its discontent like a treasure. If at first there is a wish to find a way out of the painful feeling and to compensate for the affront, persisting rancour triggers the tendency to hold on to the grievance that was suffered. Like a bargaining chip, this grudge holds tight to the object, and the wounds are kept open to nurture the need for revenge. The 'voracity of resentment', as Heinz Weiss (2019: 26) put it, does not let the offender off the hook and continues to hurl accusations at them. Others then have hardly a chance to appease the aggrieved person, and any attempt is seen as an admission of guilt, which is then cause for new charges and accusations. This allows the rancorous person to maintain control, if not of their life situation, then at least of their object of hatred. Sigmund Freud identified a possible way out of this vicious circle in the figures of the insurgent rebel

or agitator, who derive 'pleasure from the affliction of a weaker being, a pleasure due to masochistic satisfaction as well as to direct enjoyment' (Freud, 1953 [1906]: 306).

Sociology of grudges

The social sciences have dealt very little with rancour or grudges. Here it is resentment that caught the attention of researchers. Resentment is the attitude that finds one of its emotional expressions in the rancorous grudge. But even in the sociology of emotion, resentment is often understood to be an emotion in itself (cf. for example, Barbalet, 1992; Salmela and von Scheve, 2018). However, I would like to suggest distinguishing between attitude and emotion at this point. One reason is that resentment can occur in very different emotional colours, depending on who is holding resentment against whom. Grudge is only one of a range of emotions that may accompany resentment.

Following this perspective, Max Scheler (1994 [1912]) was the first to offer sociological insights on this. He described resentment as 'a lasting mental attitude' (p. 25), which is caused by the 'systematic repression of discharges of certain emotions and affects' (p. 25). Rancour is resentment set in motion affectively. Scheler thus saw the meaning of the French *ressentiment* as corresponding most closely to the German *Groll*. "'Rancour" is just such a suppressed anger, independent of the ego's activity, which moves obscurely through the mind' (p. 29). He described the key content of its experience as the 'thirst for revenge' (p. 25), which continually relives the injuries anew, randomly seeking appropriate occasions, but inhibited from carrying it through due to a feeling of one's weakness. By constantly deferring the desired reaction, the concrete events causing a grudge gradually fade. To the same extent that it dissociates from certain events and takes on a life of its own, the rancour finds its way into an individual's psyche as a persisting disposition, where it results in a 'self-poisoning of the mind' (p. 25).

According to Scheler, modern society and especially democracy have a particular affinity toward rancorous resentment. The causes for this are 'certain kinds of value delusions' (Scheler, 1994 [1912]: 25) that could first arise in the transition from feudal to bourgeois society. The estates-based system of feudalism did not allow any doubt as to a person's assigned position. Status and recognition were highly unequal but distributed according to set expectations. Individuals knew where they stood and that presumably nothing could be done to change their dependency. This was no longer true in the bourgeois-democratic age that shifted the focus to the individual achievement of status, the performance principle and the citizen's political participation. Equal personal rights competed with the social reality of unequal life opportunities. A comparison leads to both upward and downward resentment. Frustrated hopes, false promises, misguided self-assessments and failed aspirations provide the mental material. The rancour as a hostile 'emotional response reaction' (Scheler, 1994 [1912]: 26), as Scheler put it, now aims at those seen as unjustly privileged, those in a better position who did not truly deserve it, scapegoats to be held accountable.

In all its aimlessness, the rancour seeks a stereotype it can hold on to and invents guilty parties and perpetrators. In its oldest, and at the same time most threatening form, it is the Jews who are accused of the value delusions. They are stigmatised as the ultimate evil, incurring all possible projections by which the accusers can relieve themselves of their secret sides, so – as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1947]: 153)

wrote in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – ‘Goebbels [can] talk as glibly as the Jewish agent whose murder he is recommending’. Among the elements of antisemitism that were identified by Horkheimer and Adorno, rancour is presented as the affective precursor to paranoid hatred, which then finally found its viable object. Pressing toward action, resentment waits to be released, best of all from the very top. The authoritarian personality combines thoughts of revenge with submissiveness. Leaders are those who know how to utilise this rebellion of repressed emotionality.

Current social and political significance

‘There is plainly much more longing than can be realized legitimately in the age of freedom and entrepreneurship.’ This is how the Indian author Pankaj Mishra (2017: 340) described the mental state of the world a few years ago. From Mumbai and Cairo to Paris and Detroit, he saw a global epidemic of hate and resentment spreading out ever since globalisation and neoliberalism fulfilled the promise of equality and prosperity for only a few, leaving many behind with their feelings of frustration and disappointment. Those who do not profit from modernity and its promises are susceptible to demagoguery, vindictiveness, and smouldering rancour over the numerous refusals that have come with the dreams sparked by the Golden Age of brands and networks. When economic strength becomes the measure of all things, the displeasure of those left behind inevitably grows, both at the margins of the modern world order and its very centres.

The social order of our present is virtually predestined to face the value delusions that feed grudges everywhere. The performance principle, for example, is nothing but a major promise that is rarely kept. Understood as a precept for breaking down inequality, today it essentially contributes to creating an apparently indisputable justification for the deep gap between poor and rich, between better and worse. Academic degrees have become prerequisites for high status, economic success is a badge for high potential, and even the wealthy can be known to work hard. This has led the successful ones to be convinced that prosperity and social status come only through one’s own efforts, intelligence and self-discipline. Anyone who does not want to admit that luck, favourable condition and the help of others also play a role might be likely to look down on those worse off, interpreting their misery as their own fault. On the one hand: merit and reward; and on the other: failure and punishment. This ‘arrogance of the meritocratic myth’ – as the US philosopher Michael Sandel (2020: 54) has called it – demoralises the losers and lets the winners become haughty. When the self-doubt of some meets the self-assurance of others, a politically inflammable mixture of rancour and humiliation emerges among those left behind.

In the collective consciousness of the ‘deplorables’, as they were once named by Hillary Clinton, the feeling of cultural alienation also spreads, which is constantly confirmed by signs of public contempt. The ‘deep story’ at the core of this social construction of reality has been decoded by Arlie Hochschild (2016). Seeking an explanation for the anger among the US right-wing, she discovered a kind of emotional accounting system in their emotional world, which keeps detailed accounts of the wounds they believe they have suffered. They felt particularly provoked by feeling rules that expect concern and sympathy for immigrants, refugees and outsiders, while their own pride has become fragile. Their grudges are fed from the notion

that publicly designated victims of discrimination are advantaged, while they must stand back. The election victories of right-wing populists come from the invitation to make this rancour widely heard.

In Germany, it is right-wing parties such as AfD (Alternative for Germany) and protest movements such as the Querdenker and Pegida that release the rancour from its latent state. Enraged right-wingers and authoritarian rebels come together to protest pluralism, top politicians and the dissolution of an imagined unity among 'the people'. Conspiracy myths and the uncovering of secret plans show the rancour its way. Because it is guided by a rigid holding on to conventionality, it erupts with particular force in times when migration, pandemics or political crises shake up the accustomed societal order. Since grudges will not let go of their objects for fear of losing control, however, even the revolt of the rancorous does not help them to get over their feelings of failure. Aiming to end their powerlessness, they instead fall deeper and deeper into it. So, the heavy weapons grudges sometimes deploy are ultimately an expression of their dangerous weakness.

The ubiquity of grudges

So far in this article, I have highlighted the dark sides of rancour and grudge. Today, they are particularly pronounced in nationalist and right-wing parties and protest movements, and they are easy to observe there. But does this mean that grudges are the emotional property of the right-wing? Is there not also a pronounced resentment against respective opponents in many movements for emancipation, on the political left and in the liberal milieu?

To start with the liberal milieu, in particular, if it is well educated and wealthy. Signs of contempt directed at the lower classes are not only found in conservative circles. The liberal milieu also sends signals of disdain to those who do not share its way of life and its worldview. Hillary Clinton's 'deplorables' are just one example of this. It has been widely regarded as arrogant. There is an obvious reason why such kinds of resentment do not apparently have the traits of grudges. In case of resentment towards those 'below', the balance of power is reversed. There is no feeling of one's own weakness in the liberal milieu from which the grudge feeds its fantasies of revenge. This could be one of the reasons why resentment top down is emotionally associated much more often with scorn and disgust than with rancour and grudges.

This is an example that illustrates it is useful for the sociology of emotions not to lump resentment and its emotions into one, but to differentiate between different emotional expressions of it. Scorn and disgust are typically the companions of top-down resentments, grudges typically for bottom-up. This can also be seen in protests and social movements directed against obvious injustices and powerful opponents. The more powerless such movements are, the more likely it seems that resentment towards the supporters of unjust conditions will arise because of the enduring hurts. So, it is not surprising that from the labour to the women's movement, from the anti-colonial struggles in the 1950s and 1960s to the US civil rights movement and Fridays for Future today, we repeatedly come across signs of rancour and grudges resulting from having to accept existing unjust conditions as they are.

To mention just two recent examples: the often-heard statements that the boomer generation has destroyed the planet or that White people are racists by definition who should check their privileges – such statements certainly have

some traits of resentment, too. In this respect, a problematic turning point in social movements has been reached when resentment is used by self-proclaimed strong leaders to delegate their adherents' perceived weakness to them in order to overrule it. This is the authoritarian temptation that can also arise in non-authoritarian movements.

Nevertheless, from the history of social movements we also know antidotes to these authoritarian temptations and to rancour and grudges that can poison even the minds of fighters for liberty. One of these antidotes is empowerment. Today, we know empowerment mainly as a mental business tool. Through coaching and mental training, individuals are supposed to believe in their own strengths and be made fit for the status struggle at work (Ivanova and von Scheve, 2020). However, empowerment has its origins in the Black civil rights movement in the US. Empowerment was not only about battling one's own powerlessness, but also the helpless grudges within one's own ranks. Empowerment, therefore, did not only serve the struggle against external opponents. It was also an emotion programme directed against those feelings of inferiority out of which rancour is born.

A prominent example from the anti-colonial movement is the well-known book by Frantz Fanon (2001 [1961]) *The Wretched of the Earth*. Here Fanon describes the liberation struggle against the colonial powers not only as necessary counter-violence. It must be accompanied by a decolonisation of minds. And that means overcoming feelings of resentment and grudge, which only bind colonised people negatively to colonial rule.

Two conclusions may perhaps be drawn from these considerations. First, resentment and grudges should not be used for 'othering' unpleasant emotions. They are present everywhere in society – including in ourselves – in all kinds of constellations. Second, political movements that fight against resentment also exhibit resentment and grudges. But actors can also create antidotes to the self-poisoning of their minds by reflecting on the dark sides of rancour and grudges and by empowering themselves to overcome their own feelings of weakness.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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