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Making punishment palatable: Belief in free will alleviates punitive distress[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Punishing wrongdoers is beneficial for group functioning, but can harm individual well-being. Building on research demonstrating that punitive motives underlie free will beliefs, we propose that free will beliefs help justify punitive impulses, thus alleviating the associated distress. In Study 1, trait-level punitiveness predicted heightened levels of anxiety only for free will skeptics. Study 2 found that higher state-level incarceration rates predicted higher mental health issue rates, only in states with citizens relatively skeptical about free will. In Study 3, participants who punished an unfair partner experienced greater distress than non-punishers, only when their partner did not have free choice. Studies 4 and 5 confirmed experimentally that punitive desires led to greater anxiety only when free will beliefs were undermined by an anti-free will argument. These results suggest that believing in free will permits holding immoral actors morally responsible, thus justifying punishment with diminished negative psychological consequences for punishers.

1. Introduction

Back during much of the 20th century, when even the most conscientious parents recognized a duty to spank their children for misbehavior, they would sometimes tell the child beforehand, “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” This assertion was an inviting target for comedy writers, but it captures a dilemma that lies at the heart of not only parenting, but socialization, job training, law enforcement, war, revenge, and many other situations that confront human beings with the prospect of punishing one another: Administering punishment is often aversive. People who must punish others may therefore seek ways of making it more palatable.

The prospect of punishing another adult who misbehaves evokes two contrary impulses. Both are likely deeply rooted in evolution and human nature. The first is a basic reluctance to harm another human being (e.g., Cushman, Gray, Gaffey, & Mendes, 2012). The second is a strong inclination to punish those who pose harm to the self or social group (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). The present investigation was inspired by the assertion that exposure to the harmful actions of others, and subsequent motives to punish such actions, underlie the belief in human free will (Clark et al., 2014). We propose that believing in free will is instrumental and pragmatically helpful in enabling people to administer punishment without suffering the remorse that normally attends harming another person.

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1.1. Harm aversion

A universal foundation of morality is that harming others is wrong (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014). Besides the risks of social disapproval and punishment, harming others, or even thinking about harm to another, produces direct negative physiological and emotional consequences (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Cushman et al., 2012; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). Even Nazis explicitly strategized on how to overcome “animal pity” in their killing, the innate aversion to witnessing human suffering (Arendt, 1963). One of the most compelling works on the struggles of killing was by Browning (1993), with the cogent title *Ordinary Men*. Browning, a historian, wrote about a troop of middle-aged German policemen who were sent to duty in occupied Poland and then abruptly one morning were assigned to shoot all the Jews in a small town. These men experienced severe stress, including anxiety, nightmares, disobedience, and gastrointestinal disturbances. The policemen often struggled with the problem of “shooting past.” The civilian would lay face down on the ground while the policeman aimed a gun directly at the back of his or her head, pulled the trigger—and missed. At the last minute the policeman’s body involuntarily jerked the gun slightly so as to avoid killing another human being at point-blank range.

The reluctance to harm others is widespread, even in circumstances that would justify or even positively value violent aggression. The standard example would be the battlefield, in which soldiers seek to kill their opponents. All values support them doing so: They are doing their soldiers’ duty, protecting their country from its enemies, and crucially, preserving their own lives by eliminating people who want to kill them. Yet soldiers experience considerable difficulty in bringing themselves to kill the enemy (Grossman, 1996). Why are soldiers reluctant to do what duty and even self-preservation dictate they should do? George Orwell (1943), who served in the Spanish Civil War, writes that the difficulty stems from harming a fellow *human*. He describes an opportunity to snipe an enemy soldier, who emerged from the trenches in plain sight half-dressed, holding up his trousers, “I refrained from shooting *him*... I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers... a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a ‘Fascist’, he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him.” Apparently soldiers too are reluctant to harm other human beings, even their deadly enemies.

1.1.1. Punishment as harm

Punishment is a particular type of harm directed toward others who have done harm themselves, and thus, some might assume that such harm would be free of aversive feelings. Consistent with that view, research on the neural bases of punishment has demonstrated that the anticipation of punishing a norm violator sometimes activates a region of the brain associated with reward and pleasure (de Quervain et al., 2004). However, although the notion that “revenge is sweet” appears reflected in the beliefs of ordinary people, it may be somewhat misguided. In three studies, Carlsmith, Wilson, and Gilbert (2008) demonstrated the “paradoxical consequences of revenge”: participants anticipated that punishing free riders would make them feel better, but in actuality, participants given the opportunity to punish felt worse than those not given the opportunity. Furthermore, participants anticipated feeling equally satisfied when someone else delivered punishment to free riders as when they delivered the punishment themselves, but personally delivering the punishment was more affectively costly. In a similar vein, Bushman, Baumeister, and Phillips (2001) found that American college students would aggress against someone who had insulted them—but only insofar as they expected to feel better afterward. A bogus mood-freezing pill (that ostensibly rendered emotional states temporarily impervious to change) eliminated the link between anger and aggression. Thus, angry people aggress because they expect to feel better afterward, but in actuality, aggressors experienced more hostile and negative affect after aggressing.

The damaging effects of punitiveness are also reflected by the heightened prevalence of mental health issues among those called upon to deliver punishment on society’s behalf (i.e., corrections professionals; Spinaris, Denhof, & Kellaway, 2012). The practice of mixing guns loaded with blank cartridges among a firing squad’s rifles caters to the wish to sustain the possibility that oneself did not actually kill the target, again suggesting that punishing is aversive. Even making the decision to punish without carrying out the punishment oneself can take an emotional, psychological, and even physical toll. Many jurors who have served on capital trials report experiencing mental and emotional upset for weeks or even months after the trial, causing relationship problems, difficulty sleeping, and physical illness (Antonio, 2006). Furthermore, capital trial jurors whose verdicts resulted in a death sentence experienced greater symptoms of PTSD than capital trial jurors whose verdicts did not render a death sentence (Cusack, 1999). It appears it can be difficult to punish or even vote to punish people, even those who commit the most heinous acts of violence.

In fact, a wide range of deleterious effects is associated with being punitive as opposed to forgiving. Being punitive toward others is associated with higher depression (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001); vengefulness is associated with greater rumination, higher negative affect, and lower life satisfaction (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001); venting anger actually leads to greater anger and aggression (Bushman, 2002); and anger expression has been linked to higher negative affect, anxiety, and lower quality of life (Phillips, Henry, Hosie, & Milne, 2005). Similar work has linked unforgiveness with higher depression and stress; worse subjective, psychological and physical well-being; lower satisfaction with life; and more negative and reduced positive moods (e.g., Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2007; Lawler-Row, Karremans, Scott, Edlis-Matityahou, & Edwards, 2008; Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006).

Taken together, the evidence indicates that people in general have a broad reluctance to administer harm to other people and suffer a variety of psychological and physiological consequences as a result. A state of intense anger, combined with the expectation that aggressing may feel good, can overcome this to some degree, but the expectation that harming others will feel good may often be proven wrong when the moment arrives.

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