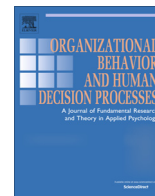




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The impact of personal responsibility on the (un)willingness to punish non-cooperation and reward cooperation



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ABSTRACT

To promote cooperation, people often rely on the administration of sanctions. However, from previous research we know that those in control of sanctions are generally reluctant to punish non-cooperative choice behavior and prefer to reward cooperative choice behavior, which is consistent with the do-no-harm principle. We propose that people are reluctant to punish because they feel personally responsible for the harm done. As such, we argue and demonstrate that the relative preference for rewarding over punishing is more pronounced when people decide individually than jointly (Experiment 1 and 2). Moreover, we show that the effect of grouping individuals on the reluctance to punish is mediated by feelings of personal responsibility (Experiment 3). These findings corroborate our reasoning that the feeling of personal responsibility has a self-restraining impact on the willingness to punish those who impair others' interests, but not on the willingness to reward those who serve others' interests.

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1. Introduction

Sanctions are ubiquitous within societies, organizations, and many other groups. Fines and subsidies are installed to steer the behavior of citizens in the desired direction, penalties and imprisonment are imposed on offenders to prevent future offenses, and employees are promised bonuses and promotions to stimulate productivity. While sanctioning often benefits the collective welfare, it is not self-evident that those in control of negative sanctions (i.e., punishments like fines, penalties or restrictions) and positive sanctions (i.e., rewards like bonuses, prices or privileges) are always willing to incur the costs of administering them.¹ Recent research has, for instance, shown that people punish non-cooperative choice behavior less often and to a lesser extent than they reward cooperative choice behavior (Molenmaker, De Kwaadsteniet, & Van Dijk, 2014; see Sutter, Haigler, & Kocher, 2010; see also Molm, 1997; Wang, Galinsky, & Murnighan, 2009). In fact, when people have both sanction means available, they tend to refrain from punishing and opt for rewarding.

Thus, although punishments and rewards can both be effective in enhancing the level of cooperation (e.g., Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Komorita & Barth, 1985; Rand, Dreber, Ellingsen, Fudenberg, & Nowak, 2009; Wit & Wilke, 1990; Yamagishi, 1986, 1988; for overviews, see Balliet, Mulder, & Van Lange, 2011; Van Dijk, Molenmaker, & De Kwaadsteniet, 2015; Van Lange et al., 2014), people usually are not as willing to punish those who impair others' interests as they are willing to reward those who serve others' interests. This general preference for the use of rewards over punishments is consistent with the do-no-harm principle, which states that people are reluctant to inflict harm on others (Baron, 1993, 1995; Baron & Journey, 1993; Baron & Ritov, 1994; Ritov & Baron, 1990; Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991; see also Van Beest, Van Dijk, De Dreu, & Wilke, 2005). After all, someone only harms another person directly with the use of punishments and not with the use of rewards. The fact that people are reluctant to punish non-cooperative choice behavior and prefer to reward cooperative choice behavior thus seems to be rooted in the do-no-harm principle (Molenmaker et al., 2014).

An important question that remains, however, is *why* people adhere to the do-no-harm principle when making sanctioning decisions. What does it mean that people are reluctant to punish non-cooperative choice behavior? Does this mean that they generally feel that no harm should be done, even when it is directed at someone who has impaired the interests of others? Or does it perhaps mean that they could live with the infliction of harm, but that

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¹ Sanction is the standard term to refer to both punishment (negative sanction) and reward (positive sanction) in various scientific domains (see e.g., Baldwin, 1971; De Kwaadsteniet, Rijkhoff, & Van Dijk, 2013; O'Reilly & Puffer, 1989; Van Lange, Rockenbach, & Yamagishi, 2014; Weiss & Sachs, 1991).

their reluctance to administer punishments results from the fact that they are the ones doing it? That is, could it be that people are not merely concerned about the moral ‘wrongness’ of inflicting harm, but also about their own part in it? It is our central premise that this indeed is the case. We argue and show that an important reason why people apply the do-no-harm principle to their use of sanctions is because they feel personally responsible for the harm done. That is, we propose that people are reluctant to punish to the extent that they feel personally responsible for the harm done. It is the aim of the present article to identify personal responsibility as a determinant of the relative preference for rewarding cooperative choice behavior over punishing non-cooperative choice behavior.

To investigate the impact of personal responsibility on the willingness to sanction, we draw attention to the fact that people not necessarily need to be solely responsible for the (negative and positive) sanctions they administer; this responsibility can also be shared when sanctions are administered by groups of people. Yet, individual decision making has been the primary focus in research on sanctioning decisions (for overviews, see Gächter & Herrmann, 2009; Van Dijk et al., 2015), thereby leaving the willingness to sanction jointly largely unaddressed (see Putterman, 2014). This lack of knowledge about sanctioning by groups is unfortunate since prior research revealed that people often act very differently as members of a group than as individual decision makers. In contrast to individuals, groups for instance are less likely to help others in emergencies (i.e., bystander apathy; Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1968; Latané & Nida, 1981), take more risks (i.e., risky shifts; Kogan & Wallach, 1967; Wallach & Kogan, 1965; Wallach, Kogan, & Bem, 1962, 1964), are more competitive (i.e., discontinuity effect; Insko et al., 1987; McCallum et al., 1985; Schopler et al., 1995; Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003), and are more aggressive (e.g., Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952; Le Bon, 1903; Milgram & Toch, 1969; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961; Zimbardo, 1969). An often proposed explanation for these group phenomena is the fact that feelings of responsibility are reduced by the presence of others with whom responsibility can be shared. This so-called diffusion of responsibility essentially entails that individuals in groups are less restrained by a sense of personal responsibility for their actions. As such, the comparison between individual versus group decision making can teach us more about the self-restraining impact of feelings of personal responsibility on the willingness to administer (negative and positive) sanctions.

1.1. Feelings of personal responsibility restrain the infliction of harm

Our proposition that the feeling of personal responsibility is an important reason why people adhere to the do-no-harm principle accords with earlier research on this principle. It has for instance been shown that the reluctance to harm is stronger when people are directly (as opposed to indirectly) responsible for the anticipated harm (Milgram, 1974; Royzman & Baron, 2002). In a similar vein, the reluctance to harm is stronger when harmful outcomes result from people’s actions rather than their inactions (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Ritov & Baron, 1990, 1992; Spranca et al., 1991). Thus, doing harm is considered worse than not preventing harm from happening. Given that those who consider doing harm as worse also feel more personally responsible for the harm done (see Baron & Ritov, 2009; Spranca et al., 1991), these early studies suggest that the experience of personal responsibility for the anticipated harm amplifies the reluctance to inflict it on others (Baron & Ritov, 2004). From this work it follows that the infliction of harm itself may not be the only reason why people adhere to the do-no-harm principle. It could very well be that people feel that those who impaired others’ interests deserve some form of punishment, but that their personal

responsibility for the sanction restrains the tendency to inflict harm. That is, when people feel personally responsible for the anticipated harm, they may be more concerned about the harm they are about to inflict on others. Thus, we argue that people’s reluctance to punish non-cooperation, as opposed to their willingness to reward cooperation, is a self-restraining tendency that originates from their feeling of personal responsibility for the harm done.

Note that our reasoning so far is that people monitor their own actions, and if they anticipate that an action would cause harm to others, they restrain it to the extent that they feel personally responsible for the action (see Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994; Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993; Shaver, 1975). In a way, one could say that decision makers basically hold *themselves* accountable for the harm they may inflict. In contrast to such an internal type of accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Schlenker et al., 1994), one could also argue that people may restrain their willingness to punish because they expect they might be called on to explain their actions to *others* (i.e., external accountability). After all, people make most of their decisions in social contexts and often have to explain their actions to others (Semin & Manstead, 1983). Accountability toward others has indeed also been identified as an important amplifier of self-restraining tendencies (e.g., Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Tetlock, 1992). People’s reluctance to punish non-cooperation may therefore also be a self-restraining tendency that originates from the fact that they are externally accountable for the harm done.

Even though avoiding blame by others is an important motive in social interactions (Shaver, 1985), and people can often get blamed for the punishments they administer (e.g., Atwater, Waldman, Carey, & Cartier, 2001; Eriksson, Andersson, & Strimling, 2015; Herrmann, Thoni, & Gächter, 2008; Kiyonari & Barclay, 2008; Nikiforakis, 2008; Strimling & Eriksson, 2014; Trevino, 1992), we propose that personal responsibility may have a self-restraining impact on the willingness to sanction, regardless of people’s external accountability. That is, we argue that personal responsibility has an impact on the willingness to punish because people hold *themselves* internally accountable for the harm they might inflict. Consistent with this notion, prior research revealed that the relative preference for rewarding cooperators over punishing non-cooperators even emerged under conditions of complete anonymity without the possibility of getting blamed by others (Molenmaker et al., 2014; see also Baron, 1995; Baron & Ritov, 2004; Royzman & Baron, 2002; Spranca et al., 1991). The fact that people feel personally responsible for the anticipated harm may thus already be enough to amplify their reluctance to harm, and increase the relative preference for the use of rewards over punishments.

1.2. Sanctioning individually versus jointly

If personal responsibility indeed plays a self-restraining role in the infliction of harm, any factor that decreases personal responsibility may in fact decrease the reluctance to punish non-cooperative choice behavior as well. As we mentioned above, we believe that a group of people with whom responsibility can be shared is such a key factor. But how do groups decrease feelings of personal responsibility? To answer this question, we turn to the Triangle Model of Responsibility (Pennington & Schlenker, 1999; Schlenker, 1986; Schlenker, Weigold, & Doherty, 1991; Schlenker et al., 1994). This model states that the experience of personal responsibility for an anticipated action in a given situation (e.g., the punishment of non-cooperative choice behavior) is determined by the extent to which one (1) knows what action should be performed, (2) is obligated to perform the anticipated

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