



# Collective punishment depends on collective responsibility and political organization of the target group<sup>☆</sup>



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Collective responsibility increases support for collective punishment.
- This effect is stronger for democratic groups, as compared to nondemocratic groups.
- The value of democracy creates higher expectations for democratic groups.
- Violated expectations decrease group value, increasing punishment.

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## ABSTRACT

What factors determine the willingness to inflict collective punishment upon a group for a misdeed committed by individual group members? This research investigates the effect of collective responsibility shared among group members and the moderating effect of the group's political organization (democratic vs. nondemocratic). Hypothesizing that moral accountability should be greater for democratic offender groups compared to nondemocratic groups, five experiments showed that the positive effect of collective responsibility on support for collective punishment (Experiment 1) was stronger for democratic groups than for nondemocratic groups (Experiments 2–5). A sixth experiment revealed that the moral and social value ascribed to democracy led to higher expectations towards democratic groups, resulting in negative perceptions of the democratic offender group and ultimately in increased collective punishment. The results are discussed in terms of defense strategies of democratic values.

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In his “Letter to America”, Osama Bin Laden (2002) claimed that:

*America is the land of freedom .... Therefore, the American people are the ones who chose their government by way of their own free will, a choice which stems from their agreement to its policies .... This is why the American people cannot be innocent of all the crimes committed by Americans ... against us.*

Offender responsibility is a central determinant of retributive judgments (e.g., Darley & Pittman, 2003; Darley & Schultz, 1990; Feather, 1996; Miller, 2001; Schultz & Schleifer, 1983; Vidmar & Miller, 1980). This is why the extension of a punishment from an actual offender to his or her group is often seen as illegitimate, given that innocent people should not be punished for a wrongdoing perpetrated by others.

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Nonetheless, collective punishments are common in social life (Heckathorn, 1988; White, 1994; Whitmeyer, 2002), for instance in schools, the military, and other institutions. As shocking as the abovementioned quote may sound, Bin Laden justified the 9/11 attacks on the basis of the United States' democratic system. This example suggests that the link between collective punishment and collective responsibility might be more complex, and depend on factors such as the group's political organization. The present research sets out to provide a better understanding of this phenomenon by investigating whether perceptions of collective responsibility shape support for collective punishment to a greater extent for democratic groups than for nondemocratic ones.

We contend that collective punishment depends not only on *what group members actually did* (i.e., on how responsible they are for the offense), but also on *who they are* (i.e., on the group's characteristics). We argue that whereas democratic groups enjoy greater social value than nondemocratic ones, this value could backlash when it is tarnished by a misdeed that holds the group accountable. Therefore, democratic groups should be punished more harshly under conditions of collective

responsibility, not necessarily because they are seen as more responsible due to being democratic, but rather because such behavior clashes with expectations held towards such a valued group.

### Collective punishment and collective responsibility

We define *collective punishment* as the negative treatment inflicted by authorities or by an outgroup upon an entire social group, in reaction to an offense committed by one or some of its members (Falomir-Pichastor, Staerklé, Depuiset, & Butera, 2007). Even if a collective punishment may be perceived as a legitimate means for *deterrence* and *prevention* purposes (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Heckathorn, 1988, 1990), it targets people who did not directly perpetrate the offense and are punished merely because they belong to the same group as the culprits. Thus, collective punishment is at odds with the individual responsibility principle that constitutes the basis of criminal law and states that punishment should be proportionate to guilt (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Carlsmith, 2008; Darley, 2002; Hart, 1968; Kant, 1952/1790; Piaget, 1932). Collective punishment is even prohibited by the Geneva 1949 Conventions (art. 33 from the Fourth Geneva Convention, “1949 Conventions, additional protocols, their commentaries”, 1949).

The willingness to punish a group should nevertheless increase as the ascription of collective responsibility increases (e.g., Schultz & Schleifer, 1983). *Collective responsibility* refers to the ascription of responsibility to an entire group (Feinberg, 1968; Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003; see May, 1987), because its members have committed a wrongdoing (*causal* responsibility). But collective responsibility can also be ascribed when group members do not have a direct causal role in the wrongdoing and therefore remain technically innocent (*moral* responsibility; Zimmermann, Abrams, Doosje, & Manstead, 2011), a situation that constitutes the focus of the present research. Somewhat surprisingly, only a few studies have examined the link between collective responsibility and collective punishment. One study showed that the attribution of *moral* collective responsibility was indeed positively related to collective punishment (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2007). In a similar vein, vicarious punishment (a form of collective punishment in which a group member other than the original offender is targeted by retaliatory punishment) was correlated to perceptions of moral responsibility, but only when it was measured after the assignment of vicarious punishment (Cushman, Durwin, & Lively, 2012).

By experimentally studying this issue, the present research aims to fill this gap and provide a better understanding of the conditions under which collective responsibility influences the willingness to punish a group for the misdeed of its individual members. We first show that collective responsibility increases support for collective punishment. Second, we contend that the extent to which collective responsibility affects collective punishment depends on the group's political organization: collective responsibility of democratic groups, as opposed to nondemocratic responsibility, leads to a *greater* increase in support for collective punishment.

### Democratic versus nondemocratic groups

Past research has demonstrated that democracy provides value to innocent members of democratic groups, thereby protecting them from bad treatment. As a result, aggressive acts against a group are perceived as more legitimate when the perpetrator group is democratic rather than nondemocratic and the victim group is nondemocratic (Falomir-Pichastor, Staerklé, Depuiset, & Butera, 2005). In addition, democratic groups are less collectively punished for such a misdeed as compared to nondemocratic groups (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2007). Similar findings have also been shown in the context of alleged interstate armed conflicts (Falomir-Pichastor, Pereira, Staerklé & Butera, 2012; Falomir-Pichastor, Staerklé, Pereira & Butera, 2012). This leniency effect has been shown to emerge as a function of the value ascribed to

democracy (Pereira, Falomir-Pichastor, Berent, Staerklé, & Butera, 2014) and to be mediated by the perceived value of the offender group (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2007). Overall these findings demonstrate that the value of democracy infuses retributive judgments in such a way that people show more lenient judgments towards democratic (vs. nondemocratic) groups.

In the present research, we argue that democratic groups are not always protected in retributive judgments. Given that democratic groups are more valued by default and are expected to organize and resolve conflicts in a peaceful way (Staerklé, Clémence, & Doise, 1998; see also Healy, Hoffman, Beer, & Bourne, 2002), and that peaceful and honest acts are more valued than aggressive and dishonest acts (Feather, 1999), people might establish higher standards of conduct for democratic than for nondemocratic groups (e.g., Doyle, 1983). Expectancy-violation theory suggests that, when an individual's characteristic or behavior deviates from held expectations, subsequent perceptions of that individual are polarized, becoming more positive or more negative according to the direction of the expectancy violation (Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987). As a consequence, the wrongful behavior of a valued democratic group should violate people's expectations towards such groups to a larger extent than that of nondemocratic groups. Such expectancy violation should result in a reduction of the value ascribed to the perpetrator group, which in turn should lead to a stronger willingness to see that group punished.

Indirect evidence for such a proposition can be found in research investigating evaluations and treatments of valued people, such as ingroup members or group leaders. These are generally more positive as compared to those of non-valued people, but the reverse is also observed. When it comes to punishment, more negative treatments of valued people have been shown to originate from perceptions of expectancy violations (Biernat, Vescio, & Billings, 1999; Karelaia & Keck, 2013). In line with this reasoning, the *subjective group dynamics model* (Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Taboada, 1998; Marques, Abrams, & Seródio, 2001) suggests that the motivation to preserve a positive image of one's group and its core values can either lead to a more lenient ingroup punishment (in line with the *ingroup bias* hypothesis; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; see also Lieberman & Linke, 2007) or to a more severe one that aims at the symbolic exclusion of the offending ingroup member from the group (in line with the *black sheep* hypothesis, Marques & Paez, 1994; see also Kerr, Hymes, Anderson, & Weathers, 1995). The emergence of one or the other pattern depends on several factors either related to the offense (Karelaia & Keck, 2013) or to the offender (Gollwitzer & Keller, 2010; Iyer, Jetten, & Haslam, 2012; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2010). In particular, more favorable ingroup judgments are observed when the fellow group member's wrongdoing can be minimized because of the absence of certainty regarding the offender's guilt, but harsher judgments are observed when offender responsibility is unambiguous (van Prooijen, 2006, 2010), consistent with an expectancy violation explanation.

Hence, it appears that the effects of responsibility on punishment are stronger for valued than for devalued people, in line with our rationale concerning democratic and nondemocratic groups. In particular, we want to make clear that we expect such effect to appear above and beyond the potential effect of a greater perceived collective responsibility for democratic groups: At an equivalent high level of collective responsibility, a misdeed committed by a democratic group member should be punished more harshly as compared to that of a nondemocratic group member. Accordingly, in the present research we also examine whether the effect of democratic vs. nondemocratic group organization on support for collective punishment predicted at high levels of collective responsibility is associated with increased expectancy violation and a subsequent decrease in group value.

### Overview and hypotheses

The present research investigates the effect of perceived collective responsibility and group political structure on judgments of collective

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