

COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT

Imagine the following scenario. One day, a well-known neighborhood rascal named Jimmy Smith pushes your brother down some stairs. Your brother falls hard and sprains his ankle. The next day, you see Jimmy's brother Adam Smith in the grocery store. Your blood boiling, you take a swing at Adam and knock him into a pile of pineapples. You were motivated by a sense of revenge, but was your behavior morally acceptable?

Consider the situation from Adam's perspective: He has been assaulted for a crime he did not commit, likely did not support, and possibly did not even know about. And he was not even targeted by Jimmy's victim, but rather by you, the victim's brother.

Most modern legal systems, philosophical theories and ordinary people would take Adam's perspective in this affair. Yet, anthropologists and historians have documented many other cultures where your behavior would not only have been typical and acceptable—it actually would have been considered a moral imperative. That is, if somebody harmed your brother, you would be obligated to seek revenge. And if you couldn't get revenge on them personally, their adult male relatives would be legitimate targets. This practice is sometimes called *collective punishment*, and the cultures that support it *cultures of honor*.

We were curious to understand the psychology underlying collective punishment in more detail. But modern cultures of honor (think of mafias, gangs or tribal conflicts) tend to be hard to find and hard to study. In order to get a hint from a source closer to home, we took a look at Major League Baseball.

If you're a baseball fan, then you're familiar with "beating" the batter. This is what happens when the pitcher throws the ball closer than normal to the batter, done for a variety of strategic reasons. (According to some fans, beating a batter refers specifically to hitting him in the head, or the "bean".

We'll use it to refer generally to hitting him anywhere. Although hitting a batter in the head is particularly dangerous, a baseball is a hard and it travels upwards of 90 miles an hour—anywhere it lands on a person is going to hurt, and risks serious injury).

When a pitcher hits a batter it is hard to tell whether it is accidental or not. In retaliation, the pitcher from the team of the batter who has been hit will then bean a hitter from the other team. For instance, if the Yankees pitcher hits a Red Sox batter, then the Red Sox pitcher will retaliate by hitting one of the Yankee batters. More often than not, the person who gets hit in retaliation is not the person who initially threw the ball. In other words, he gets punished simply for being a member of the original offender's team.

It seems, then, that the baseball community endorses collective punishment: punishing one individual for the actions of another individual, based on the fact that they belong to the same social group. Retaliatory beaming in baseball is a great example of this, and so is hurting Adam for a crime committed by Jimmy. This practice calls into question the theory of *individual moral responsibility* ("He who did the crime, does the time"), which is so typical of our laws, philosophies and customs. So, what is going on? Do baseball players and fans who endorse collective punishment have a different concept of moral responsibility? Do they consider beaming immoral, but do it anyway?

To answer these questions, we surveyed a group of baseball fans outside of Yankee Stadium and Fenway Park, and learned some interesting things. First, we learned that among baseball fans, collective punishment is readily endorsed: 44% of fans surveyed approved of retaliatory beaming in baseball, as long as the target of the punishment and the original transgressor were from the same team. This means that nearly half of baseball fans thought it was okay to punish someone who had done nothing wrong, and

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whose only fault was being on the same team as the original transgressor!

Why were baseball fans endorsing collective punishment? One possibility is that people actually believe that each individual is *responsible* for the actions of everyone in his or her own group. You may be familiar with this psychological phenomenon if you've ever played a team sport, and have had to run laps because one person on your team messed up: if one person makes a mistake, it is the group's responsibility. However, when we asked baseball fans whether they thought the batter who was beamed in retaliation was responsible for the original offense, an overwhelming 70% said he was not. This means that people endorse collective punishment, even though they don't consider the individual to be responsible.

Finally, we wanted to rule out the possibility that fans were simply endorsing retaliatory *violence in general*, which might be called "spiteful punishment". To see if this was true, we asked them if it would be acceptable to bean a player from some other team the

following evening—a team that was uninvolved in the original beaming. The fans responded that this would not be acceptable. In other words, they don't consider it acceptable to throw at just anybody. Rather, it's important that you throw at a pitcher's teammate when the pitcher has done wrong.

These studies show that we don't always need to consider a person to be morally responsible for a harm in order to think that it's morally acceptable to punish them. This may be simply be a matter of convenience. It isn't always possible to punish the person responsible and so occasionally we must settle for a member of their group or their family. Adam is right in front of you in the dairy aisle, and punishing him seems a whole lot easier than finding and punishing Jimmy. Punishment in this case still sends a signal to Jimmy, and the Smiths in general, that harming your family members won't be tolerated. And this may even teach us something about cultures of honor, like the famous Hatfields and McCoys. Apparently, human psychology makes room for revenge when it needs to, regardless of responsibility.

SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER:

Why do we feel uncomfortable with collective punishment in the Smith's case, but not in baseball? What makes those situations different?

Collective punishment seems to emerge in societies with tightly organized social groups, fierce competition, and the absence of a strong authority figure to mediate conflict (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Sommers, 2009). We've already discussed how collective punishment occurs in baseball and in blood feuds (like the Hatfields and McCoys). What other contexts do we seem to endorse collective punishment?

Are you comfortable with the idea of collective punishment? Can you think of any situations where you have engaged or would engage in such behavior? Are the social benefits of collective punishment?

FURTHER READING:

Boehm, C. (1984). *Blood Revenge: The Enactment and Management of Conflict in Montenegro and Other Tribal Societies* (p. 263). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Cushman, F., Durwin, A. J., & Lively, C. (2012). Revenge without responsibility? Judgments about collective punishment in baseball. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(5), 1106–1110.

Nisbett, R. E., & Cohen, D. (1996). *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (p. 119). Boulder: Westview Press.

Sommers, T. (2009). The two faces of revenge: moral responsibility and the culture of honor. *Biology & Philosophy*, 24(1), 35–50.