Revenge without responsibility? Judgments about collective punishment in baseball

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Many cultures practice collective punishment; that is, they will punish one person for another's transgression, based solely on shared group membership. This practice is difficult to reconcile with the theories of moral responsibility that dominate in contemporary Western psychology, philosophy and law. Yet, we demonstrate a context in which many American participants do endorse collective punishment: retaliatory "beaning" in baseball. Notably, individuals who endorse this form of collective punishment tend not to hold the target of retaliation to be morally responsible. In other words, the psychological mechanisms underlying such "vicarious" forms of collective punishment appear to be distinct from the evaluation of moral responsibility. Consequently, the observation of collective punishment in non-Western cultures may not indicate the operation of fundamentally different conceptions of moral responsibility.

If a man kills your brother, is it morally acceptable for you to kill his brother in retaliation? Many cultures—especially "cultures of honor" (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996)—have practiced this form of collective punishment (Balikci, 1970; Boehm, 1984; Gelfand, et al., 2012; Miller, 1990; Sommers, 2009). Its defining characteristic is that one person is punished for another's transgressions based solely on their shared group membership. The most common manifestation is a "blood feud" between family clans. In such feuds there is usually a preference to avenge a death by targeting the killer when possible, but it is considered an acceptable substitute to kill a male member of the killer's clan instead (Boehm, 1984).

This form of collective punishment cannot be explained by influential psychological theories of moral judgment (e.g. Alicke, 2000; Darley & Shultz, 1990; Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1995). These models restrict moral responsibility and punishment to those specific individuals who transgress. Specifically, they stipulate that a person must be *causally* responsible for a transgression and must have performed the transgression *intentionally* in order to be held morally responsible and punished. These criteria are largely shared by contemporary western legal codes (Darcy, 2002) and philosophical analyses of responsibility and punishment (reviewed in Sommers, 2009). In a blood feud, however, any male member of the rival clan may be deemed an appropriate target for retaliation, even if they played no causal role (much less an intentional one) in the original transgression.

Several social and ecological features promote cultures of honor and associated norms of collective punishment (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Sommers, 2009): (1) sharp divisions between tightly organized social groups, often kin-based, (2) scarce resources, leading to fierce inter-group competition, and (3) the absence of a strong superordinate authority, such as a state, to mediate inter-group conflict. Under these circumstances it is advantageous to practice severe retribution in order to deter future transgressions, leading to a culture of honor. Additionally, the collective welfare interests of groups and their unique capacity to control the behavior of individual members make it feasible to deter an individual from transgressing by threatening revenge against another member of his or her group (Boehm, 1984; Miller, 2006).

This analysis of collective punishment at a functional level leaves open important questions at the mechanistic level. What is the psychological basis of collective punishment? We explore one dimension of this problem: whether collective punishment depends on an underlying theory of collective moral responsibility.

Collective punishment may arise from a theory of responsibility according to which each individual is morally responsible for the actions of everyone in his or her social group, even actions that the individual does not cause or intend. As noted above, such a theory of collective responsibility is fundamentally irreconcilable with the theory of individual responsibility identified by contemporary Western psychological, legal and philosophical theories. It suggests that the moral psychology that operates in a culture of honor differs sharply from the moral psychology that operates in contemporary Western cultures[1] and

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[1] Although research suggests that some other aspects of a culture of honor remain among rural white populations in the American South (Nisbett & Cohen 1996), we do not know of any evidence suggesting the endorsement of vicarious retribution, specifically, among these populations—at least, not since the era of lynching, or of blood feuds such as the famous conflict between the Hatfields and McCoys. Accounts of

which has been extensively studied by psychologists. If so, individuals should uniformly accept or reject the practice of collective punishment across diverse contexts, depending on whether their underlying theory of responsibility is collective or individual.

The alternative theory is perhaps best articulated by Clint Eastwood's character Will Munny in the cowboy classic *Unforgiven*: "Deserve's got nothing to do with it." (quoted in Sommers, 2009). In other words, the psychology processes that lead to collective punishment may be quite divorced from judgments of moral responsibility. This is consistent with the possibility that people decide to practice collective punishment as a pragmatic concession to social and ecological conditions described above, or as an inherited cultural practice deemed acceptable "because that's what we do", and without direct appeal to moral responsibility. According to this view, individuals may endorse collective punishment in some contexts but not others as circumstances and culture dictate. And, individuals may endorse collective punishment despite an underlying theory of individual moral responsibility.

Three varieties of collective punishment

Favoring the latter hypothesis, in some contexts collective punishment appears to be acceptable even in contemporary Western society. Apparent examples include targeted civilian killing during war and the punishment of corporations for employee misconduct. It is difficult, however, to rule out explanations of these behaviors that derive from theories of individual responsibility. In order to see this point clearly it helps to distinguish three varieties of collective punishment.

The first variety is punishment of a group of accomplices who collectively transgress; this might be called "accomplice punishment". Each member of the group contributes to the transgression to some greater or lesser degree, and does so with intent. A clear case is criminal conspiracy, but the same logic might be applied to citizens who tacitly support (or fail to resist) their belligerent government during war. In such cases, punishing each member of the group can be justified by the standard theory of individual moral responsibility because each member of the group

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organized crime (e.g. the mafia) and of gangs in the popular media suggest that vicarious punishment is practiced in these contemporary Western sub-cultures, and exploring these phenomena further would be a valuable direction for future research.

can be construed to have personally contributed to the transgression, or at least to have culpably failed to prevent it (Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003).

The second variety is punishment directed at the full collective entity that transgresses; this might be called "entity punishment". For instance, if a corporation fails to comply with a regulation, then the corporation as a whole might be fined. In practical terms this fine may fall on the shoulders of members of the corporation who did not personally contribute to the transgression. But, at both a conceptual and practical level, the fine is not directed towards a particular individual. Rather, it is directed at the corporation—the collective entity itself. This form of punishment can be reconciled with the theory of individual responsibility insofar as the entity itself is regarded as an "individual" (Malle, 2010). And, indeed, endorsement of collective *moral responsibility* is predicted by the perceived coherence of the group in question as an entity, termed "entitativity" (Denson, Lickel, Curtis, Stenstrom, & Ames, 2006; Lickel, et al., 2003). This provides a likely basis for the assignment of collective punishment.

The third variety is punishment targeted at a particular individual (not an entity) based purely on shared group membership with the transgressor, and despite the absence of any personal contribution to the original transgression. This might be called "vicarious punishment" (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006). Blood feuds involve vicarious punishment: A male relative of a transgressor is a legitimate target for retaliation simply because of his group membership. While it is difficult to unambiguously categorize any instance of collective punishment as vicarious, the closer it hews to the ideal, the harder it will be to reconcile with the theory of individual moral responsibility. We focus on this third variety of collective punishment because it poses the clearest challenge to the standard psychological accounts of the psychology of individual moral responsibility.

Retaliatory beaning in baseball

One example of collective punishment applied in modern Western society that appears to be genuinely vicarious is retaliatory beaning in baseball (Turbow & Duca, 2010). Baseball pitchers often pitch toward batters ("pitch inside"), and occasionally hit ("bean") them, for a variety of reasons: in order to back them away from the strike zone, to unnerve them, to punish them for hitting a home run or showing disrespect, and often simply by accident. A pitcher for the victim's team will often retaliate by subsequently

throwing inside against a batter on the perpetrator's team. In most instances the retaliatory beanball is thrown by a teammate of the victim, not by the victim himself, and at a teammate of the perpetrator, not at the perpetrator himself. Thus, it appears to be a form of vicarious collective punishment.

The norms of retaliatory beaning are "unspoken" in the sense that they are not officially codified, but anecdotal evidence confirms that they involve vicarious punishment. For instance, player Frank Thomas explains, "Eye for an eye. If your number-three guy gets hit, then you hit their number-three guy… If they hit your superstar, you don't hit their leadoff hitter" (Turbow & Duca, 2010). Doug Mientkiewicz succinctly explains, "You hit my shortstop, I'll hit your shortstop" (Turbow & Duca, 2010). Evidence also suggests that the concept of honor is critical to the norm of beaning among professional baseball players. For instance, the pitcher Jeff Weiver recalls an instruction from his teammate Barry Bonds: "Dodgers players do not disrespect Giants players, no matter what. So you take care of business" (Turbow & Duca, 2010).

Although beanballs occur in the context of a game, they are not merely symbolic. Typical major league pitches range in speed from 80-100 miles per hour and the baseball is a hard object capable of breaking bone and causing major tissue damage. Injuries sustained from baseball pitches routinely interrupt or end players' seasons, sometimes end players' careers, and once killed a player. Beanballs frequently lead to the exchange of angry words and sometimes blows during games, and they are widely discussed among the media and fans.

We begin by asking whether baseball fans consider retaliatory beaning to be morally acceptable. If so, this would challenge the hypothesis that contemporary Americans categorically reject collective punishment, as would be predicted if it depends on a theory of collective moral responsibility. We then ask whether those fans who endorse retaliatory beaning consider the victim to have been morally responsible for the initial transgression. If not, this would challenge the hypothesis that endorsement of collective punishment necessarily reflects an underlying theory of collective moral responsibility.

Study 1: Retaliation vs. spite

We begin by assessing whether baseball fans consider retaliatory beaning to be morally acceptable. In order to provide evidence for vicarious punishment, we must show that retaliation is endorsed when it is directed at a teammate of the original transgressor, not when directed "spitefully" at a member of some other team. (By analogy, in a blood feud vicarious punishment is directed towards a member of the murderer's clan, but cannot be directed towards the member of some other clan that is not involved in the dispute). Some baseball fans might consider even a spiteful beanball to be morally acceptable, however, because they are indifferent to the danger of harm, or perhaps because they are thrilled by that very danger (a variety of sports fandom more often associated with football, NASCAR, hockey, and the Roman Coliseum). Consequently, in Study 1 we compare rates of endorsement for two types cases: Collective punishment (beaning directed at the teammate of a transgressor) and spiteful punishment (beaning directed at the member of an unrelated third team).

We surveyed 145 individuals outside of Fenway Park in Boston and Yankee Stadium in New York in the hour preceding a game. Participants were divided between two conditions. In the "collective punishment" condition participants read a vignette describing hypothetical events involving actual players on two major league baseball teams (not Boston's or New York's). An example follows:

> "At a baseball game tonight: Ryan Dempster, pitcher for the Chicago Cubs, becomes angry that the St. Louis Cardinals are winning. When Albert Pujols, one of the Cardinals' star hitters, comes to bat, Dempster intentionally throws a fastball at him, breaking Pujols' elbow and possibly ruining his career. In retaliation, the next inning the Cardinals pitcher, Jaime Garcia decides to hit one of the Cubs' star batters, Carlos Pena, in the leg, which causes serious bruising but no permanent damage."

Participants responded to the prompt, "Garcia's decision to hit Pena was (choose one):" on a 7 point scale anchored at "Completely morally unacceptable" (1), "Unsure/ambivalent" (4) and "Completely morally acceptable" (7). In the "spite" condition participants read a scenario in which the victimized team beans a player on a third, uninvolved team (not the perpetrating team) on the following night.

In the collective punishment condition 44% of respondents rated the moral acceptability of the retaliatory beanball at 5 or above (acceptable), 51% rated it at 3 or below (unacceptable), and 5% selected 4 (unsure/ambivalent). By contrast, in the spite condition the proportions were 19%, 76% and 4%, respectively (Figure 1). These proportions differ significantly $p = .001$, Fisher Exact Test, as do the mean ratings of acceptability

for the collective punishment (M = 3.6) and spite conditions (M = 2.6, *t*(143) = 3.1, *p* = .002).

Thus, nearly half of participants that we surveyed rated retaliatory beaning morally acceptable, and this effect depended largely on the shared group membership of the original transgressor and the target of retaliation.

Study 2: Collective vs. individual punishment

In Study 1 just under half of baseball fans endorsed collective punishment by retaliatory beaning. Those fans who do not endorse collective punishment might be motivated by at least two factors: Rejection of collective punishment, or rejection of the beanball as a form of punishment under any circumstances. In order to disambiguate these factors, Study 2 compares rates of endorsement for retaliatory beanballs thrown against the original transgressor (individual punishment) versus a teammate of the original transgressor (collective punishment). This allows us to assess whether those fans who do not endorse collective punishment are rejecting the beanball as a form of punishment generally, or are rejecting its vicarious target specifically.

In the National League pitchers also bat, and so it is possible for the specific pitcher who threw an initial beanball to be subject to individual punishment by receiving a retaliatory beanball himself. By contrast, in the American League pitchers do not bat, and so retaliating directly against the transgressive pitcher is impossible[2]. Participants in Experiment 2 were divided into two conditions. The "collective punishment" condition matched the corresponding condition of Experiment 1 (we also mentioned that the game occurred in the American League). In the "individual punishment" condition, the transgressive pitcher was subject to retaliatory beaning himself (we also mentioned that the game occurred in the National League). Participants comprised 78 individuals outside Yankee Stadium.

Results of the collective punishment condition in Experiment 2 closely matched those of Experiment 1: 39% of participants rated retaliatory beaning to be morally acceptable (>= 5). By contrast, in the individual punishment

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[2] Notably, batters are about 15% more likely to be hit by pitches in the American League, where the pitcher himself cannot be targeted for retribution, than in the National League, where he can (Bradbury & Drinen, 2006). Thus, whatever effect the threat of vicarious retribution has on a pitcher's behavior, it is apparently lesser than the threat of direct retaliation.

condition 70% of participants rated retaliatory beaning to be morally acceptable, and these proportions differ significantly *p* = .012, Fisher's Exact Test.

Phrased somewhat differently, the results of Experiment 2 suggest that among those fans who endorse the beanball as a legitimate form of retaliation against an individual, about 56% also endorse it as a legitimate form of retaliation against the individual's teammates. Endorsement of collective punishment is widespread, but not as widespread as endorsement of individual punishment.

We performed a supplementary analysis in Experiment 2 to test whether fans endorse retaliatory beaning simply as a function of its perceived frequency (i.e., because it's a common "part of the game"). Participants were asked how often they think retaliatory beaning occurs, as a matter of fact, in baseball. This rating did not significantly predict the rated acceptability of retaliatory beaning in the collective punishment condition *r* = .21, *p* = .21.

Study 3: Home team involvement

A recent theoretical model of vicarious punishment proposes that affective reactions to a harm suffered by an ingroup member sharpens the psychological ingroup/outgroup divide and thus enhances endorsement of vicarious punishment (Lickel, et al., 2006). This predicts that baseball fans should be especially likely to endorse retaliatory beaning when a member of their own team was harmed in the original transgression, and thus their own team seeks retaliation. This model does not, however, predict any change in the endorsement of retaliatory beaning when a fan's own team is retaliated *against*.

In order to test this prediction, Study 3 tested 79 individuals outside Fenway Park in each of two conditions. The "Home team retaliation" condition described a retaliatory beanball thrown by the Red Sox against the opposing team. The "Home team target" condition described a retaliatory beanball thrown by the opposing team against the Red Sox. All other procedures matched Experiment 1.

In the "Home team retaliation" condition 67% of fans rated the beaning morally acceptable (>= 5), compared with 43% in the "Home team target", and these proportions differ significantly *p* < .05, Fisher Exact Test. Comparing these proportions to the collective punishment conditions of Experiments 1 and 2, which did not implicate the home team, it appears that fans increase their endorsement of retaliatory beaning

when their team is the retaliator, but do not substantially change their endorsement when their team is subject to retaliation, compared with a case involving third-party teams. This supports the suggestion that harms towards an ingroup member increase endorsement of vicarious punishment (Lickel, et al., 2006).

Study 4: Punishment vs. moral responsibility

Having established that many baseball fans endorse retaliatory beaning, we now assess whether this form of collective punishment does or does not depend on an underlying theory of collective moral responsibility. Specifically, do fans who endorse retaliatory beaning also consider the recipient to be morally responsible for the original transgression?

Due to a series of late-season losses ("historic collapse") by the Red Sox and the early post-season elimination of Yankees we could not assess this by polling fans outside of those stadiums, and instead solicited 131 responses in online baseball discussion forums, directing participants to an online survey. The vignette was modeled on the collective punishment conditions of Experiments 1 and 2, but following it participants responded to three questions in a randomized order: A question about the acceptability of the retaliatory beaning (as in Experiments 1 and 2), a question about the moral responsibility of the target of retaliation for the original transgression (e.g., "How morally responsible was Carlos Garcia for the injury to David Fuentes?"), and a question about the moral responsibility of the original transgressor for the original transgression (e.g., "How morally responsible was Ryan Peterson for the injury to David Fuentes?").

These participants endorsed retaliatory

beaning slightly more than the fans tested in Experiments 1 and 2, with 61% indicating that it was acceptable (>=5), 34% indicating that it was unacceptable (<=3) and the remaining 5% indicating uncertainty or ambivalence (=4). On the whole this group of participants self-identified as very strong baseball fans, averaging 6.5 on a 7 point scale anchored at 7 with "very much" a fan of baseball, and the degree of fandom correlated significantly with endorsement of retaliatory beaning $r = .32, p < .001$.

Only 18% of subjects, however, indicated that the recipient of the retaliatory beaning was morally responsible (>=5) for the harm to the original victim, while 78% indicated that he was not morally responsible (<=3) and 5% indicated uncertainty or ambivalence (=4). Even among the 80 subjects who indicated that retaliatory beaning was morally acceptable, a minority (25%) indicated that the target held morally responsibility for the harm caused by the original transgression, while a majority (70%) responded that he did not. By contrast, a large majority (92%) of all participants indicated that the pitcher who threw the original inside pitch was morally responsible for the harm to the original victim.

Collapsing across all participants there was a significant correlation between endorsement of collective punishment and endorsement of collective responsibility $\beta = .31, p < .001$. However, this effect depended on the order in which participants responded to these two questions. When asked to rate punishment before responsibility the correlation was large and significant $\beta = .46, p < .001$, but when asked to rate responsibility before punishment the correlation was small and non-significant $\beta = .05, p = .77$. A linear model predicting punishment endorsement by responsibility endorsement, order
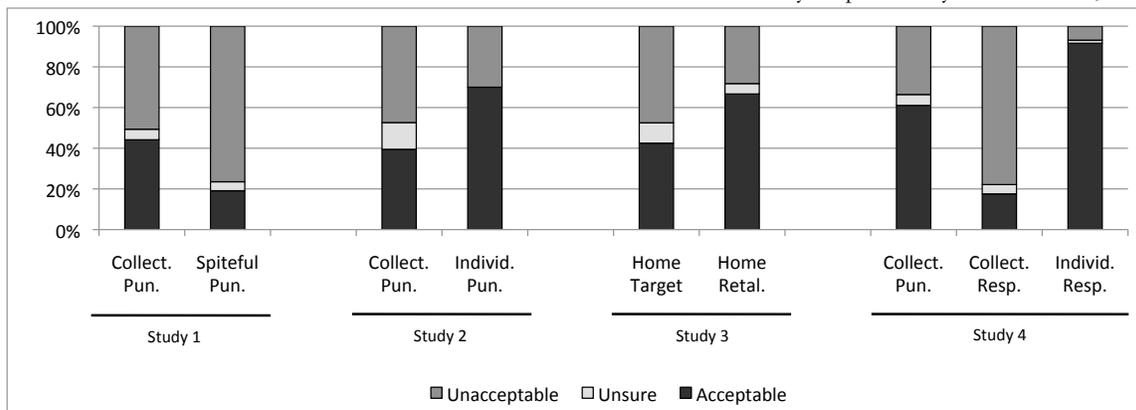

Figure 1: Across all four studies, the proportion of participants who rated the beanball in each vignette to be acceptable (>=5) or unacceptable (<=3), or who indicated uncertainty or ambivalence (=4), on a 7-point scale.

and their interaction revealed a significant interaction, $p = .014$, indicating that order significantly moderates the relationship between responsibility and punishment judgments.

Discussion

Across four studies a substantial proportion of baseball fans endorsed retaliatory beaning, a form of collective punishment, including a clear majority when judging retaliation by their own team. Endorsement was greater for retaliatory beaning than "spiteful" third-party beaning, indicating that it is sensitive to shared group membership between the transgressor and the target of retaliation. These findings demonstrate robust endorsement of collective punishment in a contemporary Western population.

We did not, however, find that a theory of collective moral responsibility underlies the endorsement of collective punishment in baseball. A small minority of baseball fans overall—and only 25% of those fans who endorse retaliatory beaning—consider the target to be morally responsible for the original harm arising from his teammate's inside pitch. These same fans overwhelmingly assigned individual responsibility to the pitcher. Thus, they appear to possess an individual theory of moral responsibility, not a collective one.

Among fans who first assessed moral responsibility of the beaning victim and then the appropriateness of retaliatory beaning there was no relationship between these judgments, further supporting the conclusion that endorsement of retaliatory beaning does not depend on a prior assessment of moral responsibility. Among fans who made those assessments in the opposite order there was a strong relationship, suggesting that the prior commitment to collective punishment induces a *post hoc* rationalized attribution of moral responsibility (Haidt, 2001). Taken together, these findings indicate that endorsement of collective punishment need not depend on the assignment of moral responsibility.

They also offer an interesting counterpoint to past studies of collective responsibility and punishment (Denson, et al., 2006; Lickel, et al., 2006; Lickel, et al., 2003). These past studies report cases in which people consider a target individual to be *morally responsible* for another's behavior (in contrast to the present study, where most participants denied moral responsibility). They show that such attributions of responsibility are predicted by the perceived entitativity of the group in question, as well as perceptions that the target directly contributed to or culpably failed to

prevent the relevant harm. We suggest that these past studies principally assessed two varieties of collective punishment described above: "accomplice punishment" and "entity punishment". Our own study was designed to investigate an apparent case of "vicarious punishment", and this may explain why most participants denied the moral responsibility of the target of retaliation.

Our study of American baseball fans is limited in its applicability to genuine cultures of honor. Future studies should test whether baseball fans' endorsement of retaliatory beaning depends on the concept of honor, and also explore the psychology of baseball players themselves—the individuals who practice vicarious punishment, rather than the fans who watch them. It would also be valuable to conduct experimental research on the assessment of moral responsibility in extant cultures of honor.

Nevertheless, our findings suggest that underlying psychological differences between cultures that practice collective punishment and cultures that do not could be more apparent than real. Rather than originating from a psychological commitment to collective responsibility, collective punishment may instead originate from more pragmatic concerns dictated by the social and ecological factors described above: the presence of fierce competition between well-defined groups, strong social regulatory mechanisms within groups, and the absence of an effective superordinate authority. In other words, people may reason that vicarious punishment is a practical necessity in order to protect themselves and their social group. Or, collective punishment may be best explained as a cultural value determined at an adaptive level by those same social an ecological factors. In other words, people may practice collective responsibility simply because it is the local norm—the unwritten rules of the game. In either case, as Eastwood anticipated, our data suggest that the moral notion of "deserve" may indeed have nothing to do with it.

Thankfully, the social and ecological factors that promote cultures of honor are uncommon in contemporary Western states, where indeed vicarious punishment is rarely practiced. But they do apply to the game of baseball—a context where collective punishment enjoys substantial support.

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