

Expressing what?

Evaluating the expressive value of punishment

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Punishment as communication

Punishment may express many messages (e.g., Kahan, 2006; McAdams, 2015):

- Prevailing behavioral norms (Cooter, 2000)
- Social disapproval of an action or actor (Kahan, 2006)
- Harmfulness of an action (Piazza, Sousa, Holbrook, 2013)
- Relative status of victim and perpetrator (Bilz, 2016)
- Moral evaluation (Cushman, 2008)

But what does punishment signal *uniquely*?

What can punishment communicate better than other, similar expressive acts?

Methods: Study 1

- Participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (N = 270) questioned about actions on an “alien planet”: “blicking” and “gomping”

Descriptions of actions varied between subjects:

- Conflicting Information: “An alien is **disliked** when she blicks another alien, but she is generally **not punished**. An alien is **not disliked** when she gomps another alien, but she is generally **punished**.”
- Controls: “An alien who blicks another alien is generally [disliked / punished]. An alien who gomps another alien is generally not disliked [disliked / punished].”

DVs: How (morally wrong, harmful) is this action? Which is more (morally wrong, harmful)?

Results

- Both punishment and disapproval, by themselves, are interpreted as signals of moral wrongness and harm
- When information conflicts, punishment is a better signal of harm, but not of moral wrongness

Study 1: Punishment particularly signals harm (but not moral wrongness)



Study 2: Ambiguous crimes are more harmful if they are punished



Variations on a theme:

Other “blicking & gomping” results

Across several other studies (not pictured), we find:

- Punishment is a stronger signal than disgust of immorality and harm, but the difference is larger for harm
- Even mild harm is a stronger signal of moral wrongness than punishment is, when information conflicts
- Social disapproval is a weaker signal of the disgustingness of an act than is punishment

But how does this work in the real world, with real acts, when harm is ambiguous?

Methods: Study 2

161 adult participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk evaluated 2 actions described as “illegal in most places,” but whose “enforcement varies”

- Actions selected from pretest to be ambiguously harmful and moderately unfamiliar
- One act randomly labelled “punished in most places”, one act randomly labelled “not punished in most places”, counterbalanced between subjects:
 - “Bringing firewood from another part of the country into a state park”
 - “Gambling on professional sporting events (outside a licensed casino or gambling facility)”

DV: How harmful is this action? (Slider scale, 0–100)

Results

- Between subjects, both acts rated as more harmful when they are punished (difference for gambling not significant)